VIDEOGAME CULTURE

APRIL 2005

EDGE

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WIPEOUT PURE

The original next-generation racer returns – is it quicker, slicker and trickier on PSP?

XBOX 2 EXPOSED

Exclusive specs and more on Microsoft's next console

INSIDE NINTENDO

The company's unsung heroes tell their story from Kyoto

MARIO KART GP

Miyamoto and Namco's driving arcade ambition





Many years ago, this magazine was in the habit of propagating the term 'next generation' as an identifier for what lay ahead in the future for videogaming. And, at the dawn of the 32bit era, the beginning of the so-called 'next generation', the original *Wipeout* was sometimes synonymous with this shorthand.

For many it was the game that defined the PlayStation experience before such a concept had even been thought up by Sony's marketing types, and it's easy to see why: the audiovisual treatment was pioneering, but more than that it was a game discernibly unlike those of the era that had preceded it. In today's landscape, *Wipeout*'s conceit does not seem so brave or different. You have to look to the hardware that runs *Wipeout Pure*, the latest iteration, to see what's important, which is among the many things we do this month in an in-depth preview, starting on page 64.

With the next generation of handheld gaming having become the now, it's time to look back at the space under your television to see how the *next* wave of hardware activity is panning out. And it's no surprise to see Microsoft leading the charge. Its proposed solution for taking gaming to its next plateau may not be quite as conventional as you were expecting, however. Read about it on page 9.

When you're talking videogaming in its purest form with the very people responsible for precisely that, there seems little point in discussing future hardware. Therefore, you won't find any such dialogue in Made in Nintendo (page 72), which attempts to get to the heart of the *Wario Ware* series by speaking to some of the most famous name in gaming's true unsung heroes.

We asked them to come up with some **Edge**-styled minigames, too. The results, as you'll see in the article, are both charming and illuminating, and proof enough that even such 'early-generation' entertainment as sketches on pieces of paper can be captivating.



EDGE

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"I'll live to see you eat that contract, but I hope you leave enough room for my fist, because I'm going to ram it into your stomach and break your goddamn spine!"

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Every month

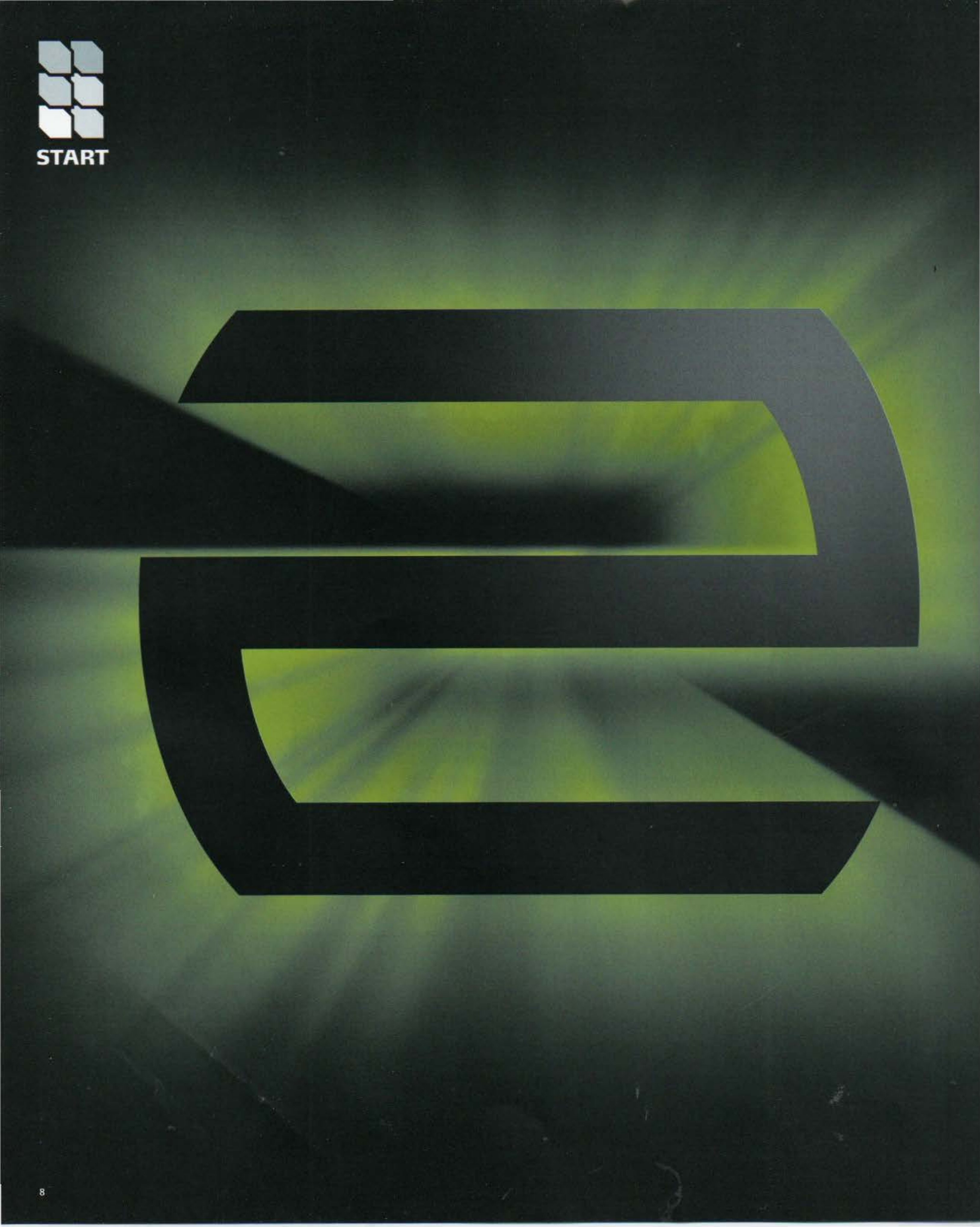
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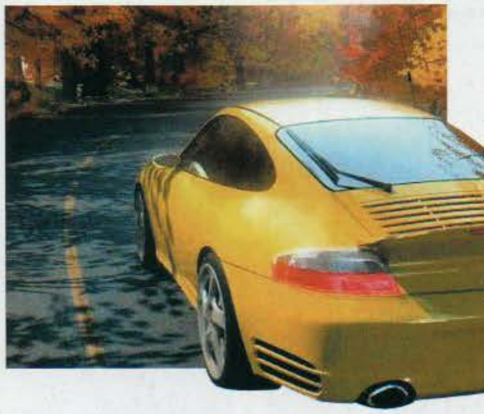
Review

START





These images of 'next generation' iterations of *Madden* and *Need For Speed*, apparently leaked from EA, give a fair idea of what to expect from Microsoft's next console, both in terms of the fidelity of its graphics and the types of games that will initially appear on the hardware. With mere months to go before launch, early Xbox 2 titles are hardly likely to turn gaming on its head



Hard Xbox 2 details emerge

Details of final specs for Microsoft's next console reach our desks, revealing that the company is committed to providing a powerful gaming unit this year

Microsoft's Xbox successor, planned for release in Europe and America before the end of 2005, will be powered by three IBM 3GHz PowerPC CPUs running in parallel and backed by 256Mb of unified RAM. Sources close to Microsoft have also revealed that the final graphics solution will be a 500MHz ATI unit with its own yet-to-be-finalised assignment of RAM.

The console, whose devkits still go by the name of Xenon but whose final retail name has yet to be revealed to even those working in close partnership with Microsoft, will also ship minus a hard drive, instead making use of 64Mb memory cards. Importantly, however, a separate hard drive unit will be made available for the console, although the price and capacity of the device is currently unknown.

Despite talk of Blu-ray disc technology being a part of Sony's PS3, Microsoft will be making use of standard DVDs with Xbox 2. The console's joypads, meanwhile, will be wireless units, and an EyeToy-style camera will be among the first peripherals launched for the platform, partly for use with Xbox Live communication software, with gaming applications also in development.

Crucially, this hardware does not reinvent the wheel: parallel processing will be an issue with Xbox 2, but there will be nothing as esoteric as the PlayStation2's vector units

Having already seen the benefits of offering HDTV support with its first console, Microsoft's next machine will adopt a resolution of 1,280x720 as standard, in widescreen mode (the hardware itself will apparently automatically adjust images to accommodate 4:3 sets). Furthermore, all Xbox 2 titles will output at 60Hz in all territories, with 50Hz displays as selectable options (at present, the reverse is obviously the case in Europe and certain other regions).

Such facts and figures reveal several insights into Microsoft's next-generation strategy. First, the Spinal Tap approach has been applied to processing power – three PowerPC CPUs are clearly 'one louder' than two, and 'two louder' than one – and each processing unit's power is in excess of those currently in use in high-end Apple Macintosh hardware. Moreover, Microsoft still has no way of knowing just how capable the finished PS3 architecture will be, so it has decided upon what looks to be a reasonable benchmark for a next-generation console – considerably in excess of even the most hefty gaming PCs in use today, and driven by architecture that will be largely familiar to game developers. Crucially, this hardware does not reinvent the wheel: parallel processing will be an issue with Xbox 2, but there will be nothing as painful as learning to make effective use of esoteric technology such as the PS2's vector units.

This makes the platform hugely attractive to developers and therefore (to a degree) publishers. Since it launched Xbox less than four years ago, Microsoft has made rapid progress in courting the game-making community to the point where many might count it as their preferred partner if only its first console wasn't so firmly in second place.

Getting its successor to market before PS3 is the first step in Microsoft's masterplan of making up the ground and eventually removing Sony's dominance. Another benefit of readying Xbox 2 for a 2005 launch is that it'll no longer be pushing sales of its original console, on whose every sale it has infamously been losing money (three top-end PowerPC CPUs will be costly, but the absence of a hard drive is a significant factor).

Xbox 2 (which may not be the console's final name, for fear of it appearing to be a generation behind PS3 when it finally appears) will be shown, alongside next-generation hardware and/or tech demos from Sony and Nintendo, at E3 in May. Expect *Project Gotham 3* and a new *DOA* to be among the console's first offerings.

Xbox 2: specs and beyond

What to expect from the final hardware

- **CPU: Three 3GHz PowerPC units running in parallel**
- **Graphics: 500MHz ATI (as-yet-unspecified RAM)**
- **Controllers: Wireless as standard**
- **Media: Standard DVD/CD**
- **Additional storage: 64Mb memory card/optional hard drive**
- **Standard output resolution: 1,280x720 (widescreen, high definition)**
- **Peripherals: Optional camera**



Eastern developments for Xbox 2

Microsoft signs up heavyweight native talent for next-generation push in Japan

Cynics of Microsoft's plans to beguile Japan (successfully, this time) with its next-gen Xbox will choke on the details of Redmond's latest signings, beginning with the shock announcement that *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi (above) has signed to develop two RPGs, with his Mistwalker studio, exclusively for Xbox 2. "Microsoft's cutting-edge technologies," said Sakaguchi, "will allow me to bring to life an array of ideas that I have had for many years." Such remarks won't promote Sony's bid to close the hardware gap with PS3, compounded as they are by the further signings of *Resident Evil* pioneer Yoshiki Okamoto and *Rez* auteur Tetsuya Mizuguchi as developers for Microsoft's machine. Expect more similar announcements in due course.


MARIO KART
TAITO
MARIOKART



A video address from Miyamoto himself (below) accompanied *Mario Kart Arcade GP*, ensuring that it would have had star billing even if Namco had brought more titles to the show. Namco and Konami made reserved appearances, while Capcom continued to be a ghost of its former self, with only medal-gambling titles



Mario steals AOU Show

A Namco/Nintendo collaboration draws crowds in Japan, while cheaper hardware provides a way forward for the arcade industry as a whole







Mario Kart Arcade GP (top) was the big surprise of AOU, sitting proudly in pastel alongside the more predictable racing entries like the fourth *Battle Gear* title from Taito (above). Both titles also shared an overseas arcade market appeal, with *BG4* introducing western courses and manufacturers for the first time

With the Makuhari Messe centre given barely a month to recover from the manga industry's Jump Festa, the 2005 AOU Show brought a similarly boisterous arcade industry determined to reinvigorate the love of the arcade.

Of the big names, Sega's dominant position remained uncontested, with its networked machines still the biggest attraction in the arcades (often literally, with only two networked games – a wrestling game from Konami and *The Idol M@ster* from Namco – rivalling the lavishness of the Sega setups). But as the market continues to shift towards lower-end hardware, it seems the company is still unsure whether to press on with a high-specification, high-cost Naomi successor, or commit to cheaper hardware such as the Atomiswave. As there were no new titles present, only version upgrades to popular franchises, the assumption was that its arcade divisions' projects would be unveiled at a later private event or the JAMMA Show – and it's rumoured Sega will show its first Atomiswave titles at the latter event.

What Namco's presence lacked in quantity, it made up for with the unexpected appearance of *Mario Kart Arcade GP* (see p38). As popular with arcade operators as it was attendees, it was felt that it filled the need for a more family- or couple-oriented multiplayer game. Indeed, the children's arcade market continues to expand, with Sega and Banpresto collaborating on a new range of titles with miniaturised cabinets and one-button input.

As popular with arcade operators as it was attendees, Namco/Nintendo's Mario Kart Arcade GP was felt to fulfill a need for more family- or couple-oriented multiplayer games

Many one-off events were scheduled to enliven the AOU atmosphere – such as a Sega-organised tournament pitting skilled *Neo-Geo Battle Coliseum* players from the audience against BunBunMaru, Japan's top professional arcade player. Needless to say, his status remained unchallenged, even when Sammy fielded its own best *NGBC* player. Another face-off between staffers from Japan's leading gaming magazines did much to raise audience cheer, though possibly not their gaming technique.

But the prevalent trend of AOU – and setting the year's agenda has traditionally been the show's

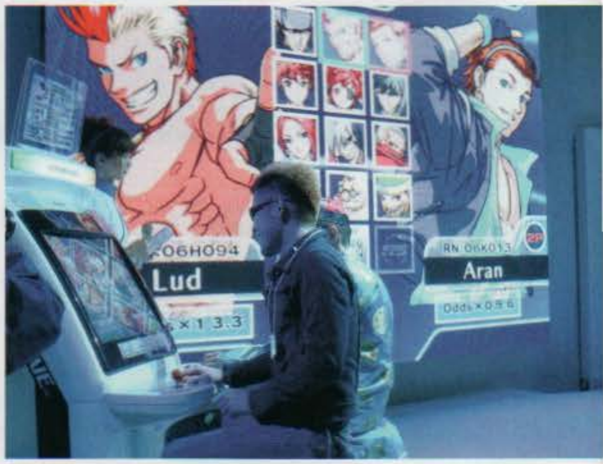


If the Japanese arcade hasn't – and perhaps never will – shaken free of pachislot gambling machines and medal catchers, the prominence of rows of cabinets at AOU was heartening: the hope now is that the focus on software rather than setup can continue to evolve



BunBunMaru (below and right) was able to take on all comers while wearing sunglasses in a darkened room, and likely with one hand tied behind his back, too. While the show floor looks as clinical as ever from a distance (above), the mood was perceptibly brighter than at many of 2004's shows, hopefully heralding a positive JAMMA event







Banpresto's superdeformed kids' cabinets drew from a grab-bag of popular animation licences, in contrast to Sega's original *Mushiking* (which has since spawned a manga)

role, with new announcements reserved for JAMMA – was the almost total absence of major titles running on expensive boards. Low-end was the show buzzword, with Sammy's Atomiswave squaring off against Taito's Type X: the Naomi era seems to be finally drawing to a close, with the workhorse board now only powering a small handful of games on Sega's booth.

Sammy's much-maligned Atomiswave has failed to make the impact on the arcade market its







Mushiking continues to be wildly successful for Sega, perhaps explaining why it's attempting to export it outside of Japan, as was seen in last issue's ATEI show report. The AOU showing demonstrated Sega's continuing efforts to cover all the childrens' franchise bases with the beetle-sumo game while it's hot





Really, Sammy could have got away with bringing nothing to the show other than *Neo Geo Battle Coliseum*, which continues to impress even now the novelty has worn off

creator had hoped for, but the system has at least proved popular in south-east Asia, chiefly with the success of SNK Playmore's titles. In some circles it has been accepted as the replacement for the Neo-Geo, although Sammy confirmed there will be no home version of the Atomiswave (through lack of commercial partners to support such an option, rather than a lack of desire on its behalf).

Attracting more Atomiswave developers to match SNK Playmore's calibre has become even more imperative for Sammy now it faces a growing threat from Taito's low-price board. *Neo Geo Battle Coliseum* was undoubtedly the Atomiswave title of the show, but it wasn't pressed for competition: compared to the full line-up Sammy had brought to previous shows, only *NGBC* and 2D fighter sequel *The Rumble Fish 2* were prominently displayed, indicating that the company is attempting to focus on its credible titles rather than the C-list games.





Idea Factory's first arcade title, *Spectral VS Generation* (left) and an arcade port of internet curiousity *Melty Blood* (right) round out the 2D fighter showing: Arc System Works wasn't ready to show its *Guilty Gear*, nor its rumoured hi-res shooter (for Type X, perhaps?) *Damu Deva*

Taito, meanwhile, is also expanding its already impressive Type X roster. The Type X is enjoying good word of mouth from currently signed developers pleased with the system's customisability, its power advantage over the ageing Naomi and of course its low price. According to Taito, the preponderance of vertical shooters is not a deliberate strategy but the result of each developer's decision – though as it's selected a Who's Who of shooter houses, it's not an entirely unexpected situation. Now Taito is seeking to diversify the line-up with action and puzzle titles, including that unlikely arcade version of *Half-Life 2* (which will be competing with Namco's *Counter-Strike Neo* to induce motion sickness in Japanese arcade-goers).

And if the Atomiswave has the most popular title of all with *NGBC*, it's clear the Type X is mounting an impressive counteroffensive on the hearts of arcade gamers, having secured support from Treasure (whose title has yet to be shown), Cave, and even previous Sammy partner Arc System Works – its current projects include a new *Guilty Gear* title, although it's unlikely that will fall under Taito's auspices. The presentation of shooter *Shikigami no Shiro III* on the Type X, though, is a







Psyvariar developer Skonec's Type-X offering *Homura* (below) was on show, with a feudal (and bloody) feel similar to Cave's classic *Guwange*, though in full 3D and with a completely different mechanic – with an almost PS2 *Shinobi*-like melee dash attack to cut through groups. AOU also saw the unveiling of *Counter-Strike Neo* (above)





Taito was showing two titles from Eugene Jarvis' American company, Raw Thrills – his lightgun shooter *Target Terror* (now *Target Force*, top) and *The Fast And The Furious*





Shooters old and new: *Raiden 3* (left), despite its shift to polygons, should be familiar to fans from throughout its lengthy history. *Chaos Field* creator Milestone's new title *Rajirugi* (right), though, with its transforming mobile phone hero and cel-shaded look, is another matte

The arrival of next-generation consoles and their next-generation development costs could open a new path for the arcade as an accessible environment for smaller videogame companies

victory for Taito in swaying developer support away from its rival.

Thanks to the Type X and some impressive independent showings, AOU was a show of shooters, with Cave's *Ibara* (see page 42) and G.rev's *Senko No Ronde* (introduced at Sega's last Private Show) drawing the biggest queues. 2D fighters also made a quiet resurgence, including an arcade version of fan-created PC cult favourite *Melty Blood* – many gamers hopefully speculating that these could see a Japanese PSP release.

Such old-school titles may seem like a step backwards, but it's become clear that the arcade's original role of leading the games industry with high-end games unavailable on home systems has become unmanageable – even its recent relegation to a preview market for popular action games before they are ported to console has been ultimately self-defeating. The arrival of the next-generation consoles and their next-generation development costs could open a new path for the arcade as an accessible environment for smaller companies that simply cannot afford the time or expense to commit to home console projects.

Already there's evidence that the low-end trend is attracting new companies to the arcades, with debuts from Idea Factory (the 2D fighter *Spectral VS Generation*) and a Subaru/Polyphony collaborative driving simulator: it's also allowing developers from overseas to compete in the market, with Korean *Psyvariar* developer Skonec producing an original Type X shooter (*Homura*), and Taito's partnership with Eugene Jarvis' Raw Thrills production company. If the Japanese arcade market can continue to court popular interest whil also providing a haven for independent development, then this will have been, at last, an AOU with a sense of purpose.

EVENT

The gaming gamble

The DICE Summit 2005 saw a host of luminaries consider the risks that face the ever-advancing videogame industry





Ted Price, president of the Academy Of Interactive Arts And Sciences as well as president of Insomniac, and the same company's Gavin Dodd speaking on how to combat piracy

From a certain perspective – at a certain hour, and in a certain state of bourbon, blackjack and bright-light-induced reverie – Las Vegas looks like a videogame. America's Sin City, where pyramid shaped hotels and fairytale castles rise up just a few hundred yards from the airport, as if rendered in some fanciful game – all built in the desert for the pursuit of pleasure *and* profit; where better for the Academy Of Interactive Arts And Sciences to hold its annual videogame pow-wow, the DICE Summit? Even by day the allusion holds; the snow-capped mountain range that encircles the sprawling city looks just like the unreachable horizons of some old-school driving game.

Just as Vegas was once the playground for the heads of the mob, so DICE (Design, Innovate, Communicate, Entertain) – now into its third year –

Ecko says that developers and publishers are worryingly disconnected from gamers, and as a result retreat into what they already know – established genres, and a focus on technology

sees some of America's most powerful publishers and creative developers roll into town to debate the future. Unlike rival conferences, there's just one track of talks at DICE: you're either in or you're out. And quite often, they choose to be out, but only as far as the corridors (just 50 yards from the jingling slot machines), and only to talk up a deal for the next triple-A blockbuster.

Bruce Shelley, **Lorne Lanning**, **Sid Meier**, Ted Price, plus a host of less well-known faces and



Stan Lee, creator of Spider-Man and the Hulk, was able to chat to rapt fans after his speech on taking risks and using humour to create characters that prove engaging



faceless suits – they were all at DICE. There was even a scattering of Brits, drawn by DICE's growing stature. Previous years have seen some legendary speeches – **Seamus Blackley**'s sermon about the economic value of original games and Jason Rubin lamenting the lack of developer fame stayed on th agenda for the rest of their respective years.

Equally, people may still be debating **Marc Ecko**'s interesting sermon at this year's summit at GDC and E3, and beyond. Ecko kicked off DICE with 'Creating Brands Without Boundaries', which he reframed as: 'Who killed Jabba?' Ecko insisted that it was complacency, not Carrie Fisher in a bikini, that strangled Tatooine's bloated crime lord, and he thinks the same thing happens whenever a business takes its eye off its customers.

The multimillionaire founder of clothing firm Rhino, Ecko exploited early-'90s retailers and clothing brands who'd failed to spot the growing status of urban hip hop among America's middle classes. Instead, they were churning out what had always sold – and trying to force it on customers. Similarly, Ecko says that developers and publishers are worryingly disconnected from gamers, and as a result retreat into what they already know – established genres and a focus on technology.

In Ecko's memorable words: "We're over-building the stuff that matters and under-building the stuff that sells!"

So what should be the focus? Culture, says Ecko. It's an understanding of cultural trends that enables clothing manufactures to sell 'retro' lines a twice the price. Culture enables Apple to trounce better-specified rivals with its iPod. Ecko highlighted key cultural trends like customisation, 'marketing the apocalypse' (catering to the bunker mentality of the age of global terrorism) and popstalgia, which he defined as a yearning for "The things we once did together – or wished we did together."

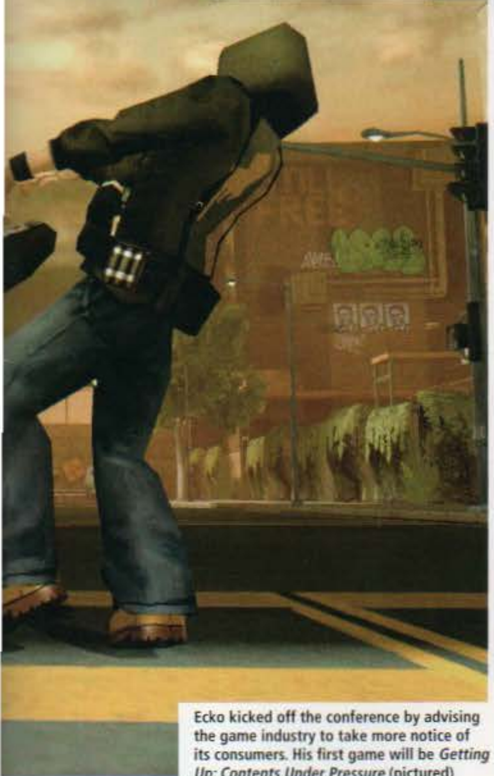
Heady stuff for the game industry, made all the more blunt by Ecko's hectoring, in-your-face style

Newswire



The Wind taker

The courtroom is hardly a foreign environment for Nintendo, the company previously having lugged both online retailer Lik-Sang and Barbie goth parade Suicide Girls before the bench. Its latest spat, with South Korean developer Webzen, however, bears all the hallmarks of an open/shut case. Publicity shots of *Wiki* – the defendant's forthcoming MMO – bear more than a passing resemblance to a certain Nintendo IP. Despite a near-identical use of cel shading, familiar face and a cloned wardrobe, Webzen maintains that the game's elaborate character generation makes plagiarism claims inapplicable. Nevertheless, it still begs the question as to why the company would publish such a brazenly comparable scene, especially in light of Marvel's ongoing action against Cryptic Studios' *City of Heroes*.



Ecko kicked off the conference by advising the game industry to take more notice of its consumers. His first game will be *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure* (pictured)





(he even invited the audience to chant back insults at him). The passion and logic of his arguments won many over, though, although it wasn't hard to find doubters who retorted that multimillion sellers such as *GTA: San Andreas* and *World Of Warcraft* suggest game developers are doing something right.

After such an electrifying start, the summit was always going to struggle to maintain the pace. But the session that followed Ecko's – 'Will Next-Gen Tools Be At The Heart Of The Next Wave of Great Games?' – effectively slammed on the brakes. The discussion over middleware (vital these days, agreed the panel) and growing team sizes (yes, they'll get bigger, but perhaps not as much as some think) was a familiar one, and heavily overshadowed by Ecko's introduction.

Neil Young of Electronic Arts surely still had Ecko in mind when he urged panellists not to be seduced by next-gen polygon throughput; the challenge was to conjure up emotion, which he saw as emerging from a game's underlying simulations. "We don't know what buttons to press or levers to pull to produce the first Citizen Kane of games," he admitted.

Mark Rein of Epic retorted that there was plenty of 'wow factor' left anyway. "We're not played out on graphics – we're 40 years away from that," Rein said. "We can't even render a table properly yet, let alone the room." He said that publishers had to treat creative staff better if games were to stay on the cutting-edge, however. "We're not going to get there with a disposable developer mentality," he warned.

With Ecko's shadow looming like the foregrounded comic book villain, a superhero was required to get things moving again. Enter, to rapturous applause from the audience, **Stan Lee**, the legendary creator of Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk. Lee began by pointing out that a similar speech he gave at Pixar, where he revealed everything he knew about character design, was followed by Toy Story, Finding Nemo and The Incredibles. "Do the maths!" he joked.

This time, however, while Lee said he loved videogames, the audience struggled to relate his advice to their own industry, if the irrelevant questions that followed Lee's talk were any guide. But there were plenty of useful pointers for those paying attention: make characters interesting, take risks (Lee believes that the less-fretted-over villains are always more colourful for that reason), deploy humour when possible, and never leave the audience anticipating what's coming next.

That's advice that many games would have benefited from.

Lee's most memorable tip is already in evidence at many game developers. "The main ingredient in being a good character designer is that you have to be a violent psychopath," he laughed. The reverential reception given to his engaging banter, and his obvious genius for storytelling, suggests perhaps that Lee's greatest effect on the audience could be to encourage one of them to dare to dream of creating a character with the resonance of Spider-Man.

The next speakers, **Ray Muzyka** and Greg Zeschuk, for their part, appeared like a comic book's mad professors. Delivering data at an overwhelming rate and submerging the audience with graphs, slides and tables, the founders of BioWare laid out their strategy for community building, and for using key consumers to promote a game's sales. It sounds mundane, but the revelation that BioWare has between ten and 25 people at any time working on building the company's community (as many as some developers have making a game) shows how serious they are.

Why? The launch of BioWare's online store just two months ago is the obvious clue. "We believe there are a lot of options beyond the standard retail model for delivering story-driven games," said Muzyka. Some of the motivation is undoubtedly to get a bigger slice of the profits, but it's also about delivering new forms of games, such as episodic content.

If the BioWare founders offered an unusually scientific take on the state of the business, Sony's Dr Richard Marks is the industry's mad engineer. Having contributed to the core technology for EyeToy, Marks now manages Special Projects at PlayStation R&D, which includes looking at future EyeToy-like devices. His rather dry talk was massively enlivened by some breathtaking demos of what a future EyeToy might do, drawing gasps from the crowd.

Marks showed off one prototype that turned a TV screen into a Minority Report-style interface. Using a retro-reflective material as a handheld marker, Marks manipulated a table of digital images displayed on the left-hand side of the screen, with the result displayed on the right-hand side. It appeared very natural, with Marks rotating and swapping images with a shuffle of the hand. Few previously imagined such technology might arrive during the life of PlayStation3, but it certainly seems possible now.

Even more intriguing were demos involving



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

In the same month as we ask where Star Wars would be without Lego, we may as well consider where everything else would be *with* Lego. Luckily, the net is awash with revisionists who've wrestled that very issue and applied new angles to our cultural icons – right angles. GTA Lego City casts Tommy Vercetti in plastic while teasing us with the prospect of *Grand Theft Lego*. At the other end of the moral spectrum, The Brick Testament (www.thebricktestament.com) is as diminutive an exercise in Gospel retelling as you're likely to encounter. But the plastic crown goes to One (www.spiteyourface.com/one) – a restaging of 2001: A Space Odyssey that'd have Kubrick spinning in his grave (wishing he'd thought of it first).

Site:
GTA Lego City
URL:
www.brickflick.com/index.php?page=gtalc

SOUND BYTES

"Joy, thrills, sympathy and speed."
Rez and *Space Channel 5* creator **Tetsuya Mizuguchi** on what he hopes to deliver now he's signed up for Xbox 2

"Gamers will be riveted by the experiences enabled by Mizuguchi-san and Okamoto-san when given the proper canvas and tools."
Microsoft's **Peter Moore** can't resist a little dig

"I'm out to destroy the competition and my videogame is no different, I plan to shake up the videogame world like I did the rap world."
Mr **50 Cent** talks up his forthcoming game

"The game is unlike any other on the internet."
Toby Rowland, cofounder of midasplayer.com, on *Nancy Dell'olio's Quiz Queen Game*

"I don't know if it's because they're impatient, or because they lack the ability, but no matter the reason those guys are a pretty weird bunch."
Why asking **Tomonobu Itakagi** about *Tekken 5* is akin to leaving the Maze Prison cutlery drawer unlocked

OUT THERE



HE DIES THROUGH THE AIR

It's a familiar premise to anyone who's investigated Nintendo's connectivity concept, but researchers at Sweden's Future Applications Lab at the Viktoria Institute are upping the ante for shared gaming experiences by not only giving each player of *Pac-Man Must Die!* their own dedicated display, but requiring that the players collaborate by moving their avatars onto each other's wirelessly linked PocketPC screens to win the game. Gameplay trials led to unexpected emergent behaviour such as 'trapping' an opponent's character by waiting for it to appear onscreen and physically moving away. With wireless multiplayer now a handheld standard, it's only a matter of time before the realm of possibilities expands in new directions.



• www.viktoria.se





Sony's Dr Richard Marks was able to show off new ideas in motion sensing, including a possible next-gen EyeToy

what Marks calls a depth camera. Here, the camera/console combination can judge per-pixel measurements in the image being captured, rather than just processing simple outlines. A demonstration, based around an infrared signal, enabled the user to appear to walk in and out of the on-screen frame, like a character appearing from some extradimensional portal in a science-fiction film. Other demos showed how the user could 'reach into the system' to, say, cast a magic spell, how they could mould at a virtual pottery wheel, and even saw Marks' movements drive an on-screen skeleton that dodged slow-motion bullets as he dodged them, like Keanu Reeves in The Matrix.

From the sublime to the... well, less than vital. A range of America's specialist press journalists took to the stage next to explain how the media worked. We tried to keep an open mind – and without naming names, some journalists acquitted themselves better than others. But defences like "You don't want to burn any bridges" and "That's when we are a bit more honest" will never go down well here. As for one particular comment – raised when IDSA president **Doug Lowenstein** urged the journalists to consider their subject matter more seriously – we will take "We see magazines like **Edge** and Next Gen trying to do it, but they reach a very small audience" as a compliment.

The first day was drawing to a close; the audience was restless and ready to lose some dollars on Vegas' craps tables. Appropriately Blackley, now of the all-powerful Creative Artists Agency, arrived to explain some of the potential pitfalls inherent in financing games with what he termed 'other people's money', as opposed to the traditional publisher/developer partnership.

Financial risk is the biggest issue threatening the games industry today, Blackley believes, but lessons can be drawn from Hollywood, which has learned to mitigate risk by "betting on talent." A great game, he showed with statistics, will typically sell more than inferior rivals, despite marketing bucks or licences.

Hollywood uses rights sales, bank instruments, finance schemes (essentially tax-avoidance setups) and executive producers (rich individuals that "are so successful they often end up dating actresses") to back talent and finance maverick movies, Blackley explained. All would come to games soon, he said, especially as the relevant Los Angeles powerhouses now see games as "hot commodities." "I didn't change," he joked, "so something else did."

Day two saw a visibly blurry eyed and depleted audience settle down to a truncated programme of talks (eventually reduced to just four sessions due to the illness of a speaker).

Like the day before, proceedings began at a high pace, with a blizzard of facts and figures from by SCEA's vice president **Jack Tretton**. Thanks perhaps to his unusual role of overseeing both firstparty game development and sales, Tretton touched upon virtually every area of Sony's current thinking on the next generation during his 45-minute-long session, but his focus was on making game development pay.

"The perception is that given the mainstream popularity of games, the opportunities [for developers, publishers and retailers] should be limitless," Tretton said. "In reality, this is the most challenging time in the industry's history."

Tretton's main charge – sure to touch a nerve with **Edge** readers – is that games are too cheap. "It is ironic that the cost of development has gone up as RRPs have gone down," he said.

As a champion of development as well as a salesman, Tretton doesn't believe development budgets can come down without impacting on game quality – something he warns would lead to consumers deserting the medium. Thus, in his view, the price gamers pay for titles must rise for PlayStation3. "Given the value, there's no reason why consumers shouldn't pay a higher retail price," he reasoned.

By happy coincidence, the next session looked at piracy. Despite its catchy title, like so many debates about the issue 'Dude! Who Stole My Game!?' failed to take off. Few doubt piracy is an important issue – and a significant cause of lost revenue for the videogame industry – but urging developers and publishers to respect IP rights and stop illicitly ripping tunes to their iPods, to "set a standard for others to follow for now and future generations," as Lowenstein put it, seems like a rather optimistic approach.

As Gabe Zichermann from Trymedia suggested, in much of the world, such as China, piracy reflects the fact that games simply cost too much for local consumers to pay. In the first world, Zichermann argued, we have to accept that gamers expect freedom in how they choose to use the products they buy. Beyond that, technologies like mandatory







Top row, left to right: Sony's Jack Tretton, writer Flint Dille and Lorne Lanning. Below: Sid Meier talked about storytelling (left) and Tim Schafer spoke about game publishers' attitude toward creativity, his time at LucasArts and 'Mechanical Fire And Voodoo' to a responsive audience

online registration will provide the solution. Publishers on the panel and in the audience were unsatisfied. "It's all piracy, it's all stealing the lifeblood from someone who put all that work into it," said one, reasonably enough, but he weakened his case by claiming the music industry was caught out by failing to enforce its IP rights, and by selling "piracy equipment" in music stores. (Well, that'd be tape recorders, right?)

The head clashes continued, albeit at a more measured pace, in 'You Don't Need A Story If You've Got A Big Gun!' which brought together luminaries **Daniel Arey** (creative director of Naughty Dog), Sid Meier (founder of Firaxis), **Flint Dille** (a Hollywood writer who worked on Chronicles Of Riddick) and Lorne Lanning (founder of Oddworld Inhabitants) to debate the importance of story in games. "My sense is that storytelling is a very small part of what we do," declared Meier. "Many of the conventions of stories conflict with what we do." Considering the careers of his fellow panellists, the *Civilisation* creator's approach could only ruffle feathers, but he returned to it repeatedly throughout the session.







Everyone else felt storytelling was vital. "The story in a game is the character, and today we still have very damp characters," said Lanning. Only better characters can improve the player's emotional connection with games. "We're still in the primitive stage between finding out what constitutes a quality challenge, and how the story can enhance that." Arey went further: "I'm going to go out on a limb and say that in almost every genre, a story can enhance the game," he said. Even racing or sports games would benefit from taking players behind the scenes to see what motivates the protagonists. "The NFL has made its billion dollar empire by selling a story – by selling heroes and villains," agreed Dille.

But Meier returned to the difficulties, not least the sheer practicality of non-linear storytelling. "If I write a Sherlock Holmes story and Holmes never goes into the dining room, there is no dining room," he said. "In games, you're having to write an infinite series of possible stories." From these exchanges, it's clear that the argument is partly a semantic one. Some developers see story as anything beyond twitch mechanics (so story is character, say, or the setting), whereas for others it's a linear tale-telling device. Such quibbles aside, it's an important debate; for years storytelling has been considered the Great White Hope of videogames, but approaching the tenth anniversary of the seminal storyteller *Half-Life*, and judging by this DICE session, that hope remains as elusive as Moby Dick.

If anyone can crack the conundrums of storytelling, it's **Tim Schafer**. The diffident and quietly hilarious former LucasArts guru and creative genius behind the likes of *Full Throttle* and *Grim Fandango* arrived on stage to urge his audience to more take creative risks when making games.

"With some publishers it was like creative was a dirty word. They'd say: 'This is really, really great. Really great. It's just a shame people aren't going for creative stuff right now'"

Creativity, Schafer reports, is an endangered ingredient of game creation. When he was shopping his upcoming action/adventure game, *Psychonauts* (which he did a lot, having to swap publishers to Majesco after Microsoft dropped it), Schafer saw executives who loved the game, and some who didn't, and he could deal with both. What bothered him, he explained, were those who said: "'It's great to see someone really going for it – but we'll pass on the game'. A publisher saying 'Wow, you're really creative!' was a warning sign," said Schafer with a rueful smile. "It was like creative was a dirty word. They'd say: 'This is really, really great. Really great. It's just a shame people aren't going for creative stuff right now'."

Schafer's main motivation in development now, he revealed, was to prove wrong those who shunned "the stink of creativity."

Schafer's outlook is also informed by changes he saw in the '90s at LucasArts (which he referred to with codewords throughout the talk, apparently fearing some legal challenge: 'Space Pals' was surely Star Wars, and special effects house Industrial Light And Magic became 'Mechanical Fire And Voodoo'). Schafer explained that game developers were initially steered away from the Star Wars properties, and encouraged instead to develop original games. He speculated that the plan at the time was possibly to prepare the company for a sale – something that would only be enhanced by a growing stable of interactive IPs. The result was legendary PC games like *Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Sam & Max Hit The Road*.

Eventually, though, the game department was allowed to make Star Wars titles. At first the developer put just as much energy into these licensed games as its own, and the result, says Schafer, were good and innovative games, as well as lucrative. But in time the big revenues earned by the licensed games took the focus off the company's original games, leading eventually to the creatively motivated staff leaving the company.

"I think this could actually happen to the entire industry," Schafer warned. "If the creativity goes, creative people will leave. There are other things they can do with their time."

Schafer revealed how he himself devised creative original titles. His method is to try to enable the player to be the most interesting character in the game world. "All games are *MechWarrior*," he said. "You strap on a suit of some kind and stomp around. The suit gives you abilities that you don't have in real life – even a tuxedo that turns you into James Bond."

Developers ought to be creative, Schafer said, because there was no evidence that derivative games made money; the bottom of the charts are full of 'me too' titles. "Don't bother playing safe," concluded Schafer, "because there is no such thing as safe."

It was an appropriate way for the DICE summit to end. Las Vegas, a city where the odds really are stacked against you, proved an excellent venue to think about the financial risks of making interactive entertainment. And if Ecko or Schafer inspired just one studio head to greenlight an exceptional and original game, then the IDSA's third throw of its DICE can be called a winner.





The IDSA's Doug Lowenstein (left) had something to say about magazines and the media in general, while Seamus Blackley from CAA (above) spoke about game financing and the relationship between developers and publishers



The art of wire work

An audience with Japanese codeshop Tranji on fishing, violence and the female action hero



New developer Tranji's debut project *Red Ninja* takes a surprisingly arthouse approach to an otherwise staid genre, influenced by a meeting of the minds (and artistic visions) of film and game director Shinsuke Sato. We quizzed Tranji president **Taka Suzuki** on the curious product of their union.

Compared to other ninja titles, or even other action games, you've used vivid colours and concentrated on light rather than shadow. What factors influenced your artistic design?

It was a combination of two things. Since the characters were created in a manga style, conventional-looking backgrounds would not have worked very well. We needed to use a more saturated colour palette to make everything fit together. Also, both Vivendi and Tranji wanted to make this title look and play differently from other ninja games. We did not want to be 'just another ninja game', but to stand out above the rest.

"We thought that angling for fish looked like fighting against an enemy, and that the idea might be good for an action game"

So was it an intentional design decision for the beauty of the game's atmosphere to be such a contrast to the violence?

Yes, it was intentional. Playing violent action in a dark environment just wasn't enjoyable to us. We used the contrast between the environments and the violence to make both of them stand out. Plus, the player can experience all four seasons in beautiful Japanese environments during the game – but there is lots of content beside the historical attraction.

You've chosen to mix genres – drawing from stealth, action and platforming – while many Japanese developers choose to narrowly focus on one. What do you think makes your fellow developers less experimental? And what made you take the risk?

Japanese game software developers originally excelled in breaking the barriers of the meagre hardware of the 8-to-32bit era, in doing things that were otherwise deemed technically impossible. Now the plentiful resources of the PS2 have allowed for those who want to develop experimental software, as this platform could take the extra pounding. However, I believe we have come to a point where platform-driven game developing will no longer meet required expectations. We have intentionally placed our main focus on creating software to realise the game mechanics rather than rely on hardware-based mechanics. As addicts of the conventional ninja games, our goal was to create a ninja game worthy of the PS2 and Xbox. This resulted in our state-of-the-art ninja action game.



Expansive natural environments and lazy afternoon sunshine are not what you'd expect from a ninja title, to Tranji's credit





How did the game concept grow around the mechanic of the Tetsugen wire?

The idea is actually based on fishing. We thought that angling for fish looked like fighting against an enemy, and that the idea might be good for an action game. We also felt that, in other games, there was a slight time lag from when players press buttons until the enemies are hit, even when using guns.

Red Ninja is not like that. This is a game where players get reactions immediately when they press the buttons. We focused on quick reactions with the Tetsugen: when you press the button, the targeted enemy will die a horrible death.

It's not easy to master the Tetsugen, but it's easy to pick up and play. But players who master it will find it much more satisfying than other action games.

It seems that some gamers are less willing to play action games with female main characters than they are with male ones – there were complaints about both *Tenchu Kurenai* and *Kunoichi*'s female leads, for example. Why do you think this is?

We think there are two main causes for that assumption. One of them has to do with female characters looking thin or slight. Players might think a thin girl can't control very heavy weapons and kill so many enemies. [*Red Ninja*'s] Kurenai is not too thin or too bulky and she has weapons that complement her appearance. You will know why she has survived when you see the Tetsugen in action.

Another reason is the loveliness female characters have. Kurenai's appearance is in between reality and gamers' taste. Although her personality is very faithful, sometimes she shows her girlish face, which is very nice. We hope many players feel something special with *Red Ninja* and that Kurenai will be loved by them.

Though Kurenai is a strong, engaging heroine, were you concerned that she could be undermined by the combination of that short skirt and those camera angles?

We didn't worry about it. The seductive content is one of attractions in this game. It can only be a problem if the player is focusing too much on it; then they will be killed.

What do you hope other games will take from *Red Ninja* as inspiration?

We are proud of our achievement with *Red Ninja*. It wasn't easy to complete but I hope it will inspire other game makers to think of interesting new weapons and combat for action games. But before that, please play and enjoy *Red Ninja: End Of Honour*!

ONLINE

My name is Jamie Kane

An ambitious new interactive BBC concept seeks to rejuvenate the market for 'alternate reality' gaming







As well as the fake sites, such as this Dubai hotel, created to drive the plot forward, Jamie Kane's presence has also been integrated within various official BBC websites to further blur the illusion between the game and reality

Representing the first time the BBC has launched a game not linked to an existing broadcast property, it's clear that *Jamie Kane* marks an experiment for the corporation. But that's not the limit of its innovation.

"Traditionally we've been good at serving certain demographics; CBeebies for young children or sports for men, but 14- to 17-year-old girls aren't a group we tend to reach," explains **Rob Cooper**, a senior producer in the BBC's interactive drama and entertainment department. "From our user research, we know girls like games such as *The Sims*, so with *Jamie Kane* we hope we'll be able catch a spark."

A free-to-play investigative web-based mystery game, *Jamie Kane* puts players in the role of a fan of a Robbie Williams-style popstar, presumed killed in a helicopter crash. As rumours start to harden, however, it becomes clear that more is going on than at first appears.

Broken up into 15 daily chunks of around 30 minutes each, the game operates via a mixture of emails and AI-controlled chat agents, which send players searching the internet for fake websites containing clues. The character of Jamie Kane has been sneaked into official BBC websites, too – try searching for him in the Top Of The Pops section for example. At various points the game also offers players the option to leave messages via phone, which will trigger a response in kind.

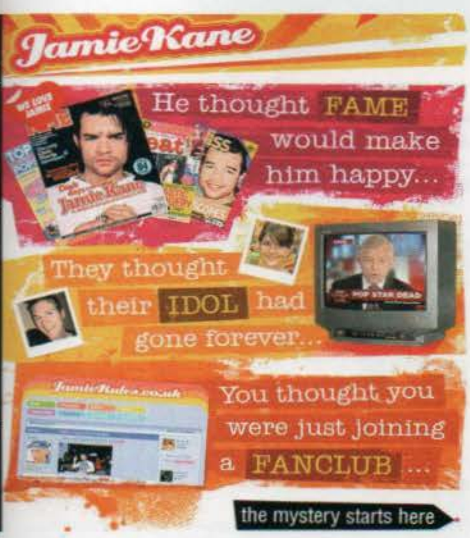
"It was one of the things people really loved about EA's game *Majestic*," Cooper explains. "Blurring the line between the game and reality was something we wanted to incorporate. It's only an audio loop, but I think it will be plausible because of the context."

Originating from a treatment from author Matt Beaumont, who provides the script, the project builds on the talents of Flash studio Preloaded and internet chat specialist Creative Virtual, which created the artificial-intelligence backend. Using a keyword approach, the game relies on players' responses to seemingly innocuous questions to create the illusion of a chatroom populated with real characters. Each player is contained within their own linear experience, however.

The game relies on players' responses to seemingly innocuous questions to create the illusion of a chatroom populated with real characters

"When I first got interested in alternative reality gaming, the big projects were *The Beast* [a marketing ploy for Spielberg's film AI] and *Majestic*," Cooper says. "The problem, however, is they tend to fragment, with only a few people actually playing and a lot of people watching. They only last a short period of time, and for those reasons it isn't worth investing a huge amount of resources."

The singleplayer focus of *Jamie Kane* gets around such issues, and also means the game can be kept live for years if necessary. "Ideally we'll get around 100,000 players in the first year," Cooper says, when asked his goals for the project. "But I also hope it will provide a structure so companies can see the potential of Flash gaming. There's a huge amount of talent in the UK, which is currently limited to standalone advertising games. I'd like to try and show there's a market for more involved games such as *Jamie Kane* which involve an element of storytelling."



Players' registration occurs though this BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk/jamiekane) but the rest of the *Jamie Kane* game takes places via fake websites and a forum of AI bots that pick up on players' answers. *Jamie Kane* launches March 30

OUT THERE



PAPER MARIO FOR WINDOWS

As a part of Engineering Week at the University Of California, an anonymous group of artists chose the facility's E2 building as their canvas for a timely homage to *Super Mario Bros.* With the help of 12 students, one-and-a-half twilight hours and 3,500 rectangles of adhesive paper, an impressive diorama was cast across the building's windows "as an homage to the inspirational works of great computer engineers and scientists." By their own admission, however, the group failed to consider the lesser enthusiasm of the building's economics department, arriving the next day to find a quarter of their four-storey masterpiece removed. Having survived the rest of the week, the remaining paper pixels were ceremoniously taken down, the offending economists given a noteworthy farewell.

● www.yikes.com/~pengo/8bit/

EVENT





Something for every gamer

From Matthew Smith to shoot 'em ups and cross-stitched Street Fighter characters, Screenplay 05 offered a smorgasbord of gaming culture

Now in its fifth year the Screenplay festival, held at Nottingham's Broadway cinema at the end of February, once again demonstrated the vibrancy of game culture. An invigorating mix of seminars, demonstrations, exhibitions and music, there were also plenty of games of various era and descriptions available when the talking proved too much.

The headline act saw the return of mercurial Spectrum coder Matthew Smith. Reminiscing about the processes and problems behind the creation of *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*, he revealed he's currently working on a new Spectrum game, amongst other projects. Someone else mining gaming's past to shed light on the present was Tom Betts, who spoke on the history of shoot 'em ups, something backed by a collection of playable games ranging from *Jetpac* and *Tempest* through to *Gradius V* and *Ikaruga*.

But nostalgia wasn't the only theme. Local startup Strawdog Studios presented its *Bugs Of War* project publicly for the first time, while the region's expertise in online gaming was highlighted with a presentation on niche MMOG *Second Life* by **Jim Purbrick**. "We've solved the problem of how to create content for online games by getting players to do it for us," he explained. "It's a great example of unleashing the creativity of your audience instead of forcing them to do what developers think they should do." A similar approach was being encouraged by researcher Jacob Habgood, who headed sessions on the educational potential of game-making, both in terms of empowering students and, more importantly perhaps, teachers too. And if all that wasn't enough, other attractions included an exhibition of cross-stitched *Street Fighter* characters, a pavement-projected version of *Pong* and the chance to play *Halo* on a cinema screen.



One of Faye Lampshire's remarkable cross-stitched *Street Fighter* characters (top left). The simple pleasures of *Jetpac* on the Spectrum catching the eye (top) and the eager Matthew Smith (above)

Continue

Non-silver DSes
Of Nintendo's new range, we like black and white

Nintendogs
Not as fun as real mutts, but a lot less messy

Edge in Wipeout Pure
It's like those skylines were made for the logo

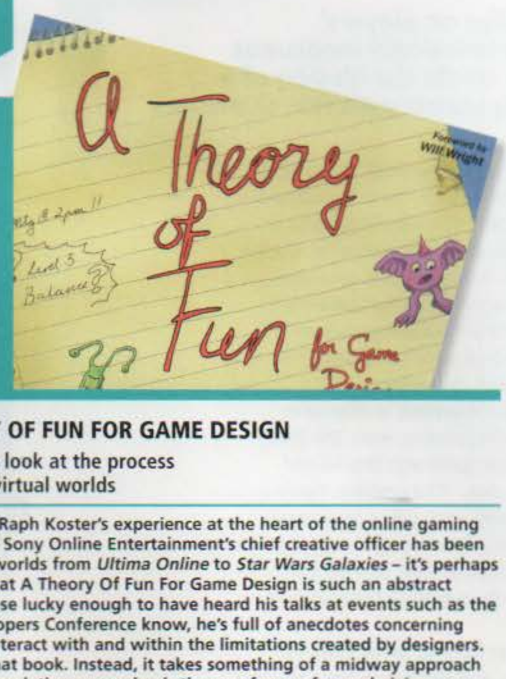
Quit

MMO friends MIA
Where were you on Tuesday, as planned?

Prerendered 'action'
It's hard to make calls on the basis of this, y'know

Non-silver DSes
Of Nintendo's new range, we dislike blue and pink

Author: Raph Koster
Publisher: Paraglyph
isbn: 1 932111 97 2



A THEORY OF FUN FOR GAME DESIGN

An abstract look at the process of making virtual worlds

Considering Raph Koster's experience at the heart of the online gaming experience – Sony Online Entertainment's chief creative officer has been involved in worlds from *Ultima Online* to *Star Wars Galaxies* – it's perhaps surprising that A Theory Of Fun For Game Design is such an abstract book. As those lucky enough to have heard his talks at events such as the Game Developers Conference know, he's full of anecdotes concerning how users interact with and within the limitations created by designers. This is not that book. Instead, it takes something of a midway approach between formulating an academic theory of game fun and giving examples of how such fun works in practice. It can make for something of an uneasy read, although there are valid points and methodologies to be discovered. His idea of how the brain chunks up routine is interesting in a wider context than games, for example. Equally, his framework questioning whether the medium can ever be seriously viewed alongside other communications media without illuminating aspects of our humanity we did not understand fully beforehand should find its way into the industry psyche. But conversely, Koster's attitude that games do, and hence should, teach players skills rather than 'just' being fun seems to run counter to the entire point of writing such a book. Most peculiar however is his almost moral assertion that once you've mastered a game, you should do yourself a favour and quit. But if nothing else, it's a book that gets you thinking, even if it's not as fun as you'd originally hoped.

Author: David Michaels
Publisher: Berkley
isbn: 0 425 20168 6



TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL

When is a Tom Clancy novel not a Tom Clancy novel?

And so the Tom Clancy paradigm comes full circle. The author who founded Red Storm, the North Carolina development company, to further the outpouring of his crypto-military literary imagination, finds his name in the title of a book based on a character created by the Montreal outpost of that studio's current owner, French publisher Ubisoft. Of course, Clancy himself is only involved in this exercise at arm's length. One of his skills has always been delegation, as can be seen in the long list of scenarios he's credited as creating. Although where that leaves David Michaels is another matter. *Splinter Cell* protagonist Sam Fisher is a great game character, a steely special-op spook with a bag full of gadgets and a mission to save the world from cipherous groups of terrorists and organised criminals. But as the core for a book, even (dare it be said) an airport pageturner such as this, where do you go? Michaels does his best with the tools at his disposal. Backstory includes a wife, long dead to that most sympathetic of diseases, cancer. There's also his daughter. Once distanced, Fisher's relationship with the attractive 20-something is improving. Hey, maybe he might need to rescue her at some point? For it's what Fisher does that both author and reader are really interested in. Deployed to the far east, it's not long before Fisher is deploying sticky cameras and firing airfoil projectile rounds with routine abandon. And from there it's on to Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Cyprus, Israel... And guess what? The bad guys just keep on falling down.





INTERVIEW

Romancing the kingdom

The name Koei is firmly established in Japan and the US, but now it has its eye focused on the UK, too. We find out how...

While the *Dynasty Warriors* series concerns itself with domination of the Japanese sales charts through the domination of China, Koei has other tactics for taking the baby-step evolutions of its own games into battle within the global publishing scene. We spoke to product manager **Kenichi Matsumoto** (above) about the company's fledgling Euro operation and beyond.

The *Dynasty* (and *Samurai*) *Warriors* series have been brought to Xbox, despite that console's distinct lack of success in Japan. Why hasn't the series made it on to the GameCube?

"It's part of the company's objective to make more games based on western themes. We're opening a studio in Canada that will be working on games of a more western feel"

It's a lot to do with Koei's success on GameCube to date. We've launched one title on the machine so far – *Mystic Heroes* – which didn't inspire us to do any more work on the machine, even though we feel the gameplay was suitable to the audience of the GameCube. The way the market has changed means that the investment and development time required just isn't viable.

Were you ever tempted to use the *Dynasty Warriors* format to create games based on western icons, either legendary or historical?
It's part of the company's objective to make more games based on western themes. We're just opening a studio in Canada that will be working on games of a more European and western feel. There could be games that adapt the *DW* engine to realise something along the lines of the Wars Of The Roses, for example, in order to appeal to a different market while also serving the hardcore *DW* fan who likes the engine and the style of play.

How about utilising the engine to produce something a little more fantastic or demonic, along the lines of *Otogi* or *Devil May Cry*?
Horror games? No. We don't want any blood. The top management at Koei are big history fans and they like to keep to that kind of theme.

Three games are due this year in Japan based on legendary hero Yoshitsune. Why hasn't Koei produced its own take on his story?
The CEO of Koei and her husband (the producer of *Kessen III*) like *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms* and the story of Nobunaga better than Yoshitsune!

THQ used to publish *Dynasty Warriors*, and Koei's other titles, in Europe. Why was there a need to create a dedicated European arm? Were there frustrations involved?
It's Koei's objective to have an independent presence in every territory in Europe. The Japanese office is 25 years old, the US office is ten years old, the UK office is two years old and the France office has just been announced. Germany is the next





As well as the lack of blood, *Dynasty Warriors 5* extends its clinical morality to its animal troops. "You cannot kill the tigers belonging to your opponents," explains Matsumoto. "You will have to take down their trainers in order to remove them"

Newswire



Half-Life 2 steamrollers BAFTA

***Half-Life 2* walked away with the lion's share of gongs at the second annual BAFTA Games Awards this month. Winning in the Best Game, Action Adventure, PC Game, Art Direction and Animation categories, Valve's opus surprisingly struck gold for its multiplayer add-on as well, doubtless much to the displeasure of Bungie. Nevertheless, *Halo 2* did bag the Xbox-specific award while *Burnout 3: Takedown* garnered well-deserved recognition in the Racing, Technical Direction and PS2 categories. An originality award went to the *Singstar* games while *Donkey Konga* and *Pro Evolution Soccer 4* were recognised for their achievements in the children's and sports genres. The night's most prestigious nod – the BAFTA Special Award – was given to Rockstar's Sam Houser and Leslie Benzies for an outstanding contribution to the videogame industry.**







It's improved over its predecessor but is *Dynasty Warriors 5* (see page 45) – obligatory *Xtreme Legends* expansion pack not withstanding – the final outing for the series on the current generation of hardware? "I think so," says Matsumoto

planned territory, and then Spain. It's because Koei is very protective of its brand, and believes it can do the best job with its best people to represent it. Also, as with any process that features a middleman, you lose some of the margins; Koei is a very profit-oriented company, one of the most profitable in the software industry. It's the wish of Mrs Erikawa (Koei's CEO) that part of her global strategy is to become the biggest software company in the world, and for that to happen she must have an office in every territory. The relationship with THQ still exists in both Germany and France, and the relationship ceased to exist in the UK because a PR representative came on board with the general manager to have more direct input and to build up our own relationships with retail and the press. The same is true for Capcom and Square, and the other Japanese companies that are moving across – it's in order to be taken more seriously, beyond being someone else's brand extension, which is the way that retail view it, and not the way that THQ presented it.

Who made the decision to bring Nippon Ichi's strategy-RPG PS2 games to Europe?

Our Japanese HQ decided it. It has a special relationship with Nippon Ichi. The CEO of Nippon Ichi's US office used to work at Koei, and the relationship still exists. But the relationship between the Japanese offices is also very strong.

And finally, *Gitaroo Man*... are there any plans for a sequel?

[Laughs] We talked about *Gitaroo Man* when driving around this morning. Steve [Marks, Koei UK's PR representative] opened up his glove compartment, and a thousand CDs fell out along with a copy of *Gitaroo Man*. Everyone thinks it's amazing. But there weren't enough copies sold in the UK, and the rhythm-action genre rarely sells, regardless of critical praise. It's a big problem. The producer now works producing strategy guides and game soundtracks at KOEI. I think the game would work really well on DS, but there are no future plans at all for the series, sadly.



OUT THERE



8 BITS GOOD, POST 1995 BAD

For those thirsting for more art of games rather than games as art, Los Angeles based Gallery 1988 and Acme Game Store are curating a new show titled I Am 8-bit, collecting retro-inspired works ranging from traditional paintings to sculpture and plush designs. The exhibit will feature a hundred artists reinterpreting their deepest nostalgia-addled gaming memories (nothing past 1995, please), and as part of Gallery 1988's youth-targeted mantra, all pieces will be sold at affordable prices, so the chances of walking away with a painting such as Sean 'fnoak.com' Clarity's Excitebike (shown) are better than you might imagine. I Am 8-bit's opening night party is set for mid-April, with a closing night blowout, appropriately, on the first day of E3. See the dedicated website for more details.

www.iam8bit.net



A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Tameem Antoniades of Ninja Theory continues his next-gen push

Financial years are one of the evils of the accounting world. The end of ours was July 31 2004. Having had the most incredible response to *Heavenly Sword* at GDC back in March 2004, we are now at E3 hoping that rhetoric will turn into a signed contract before that dreaded date.

We are not taking any chances. Every big publisher wants something different, works a different way, values different ideals. We chuck the lot in: beautiful graphics, new gameplay, great 7.1 sound, armies, online play and some spiffing high-end technology.

E3 becomes a repeat of GDC, though now we are given more than five to ten minutes per pitch and have a more senior audience. We again leave jaws

One wants more online stuff, one wants our game to be more contemporary, one wants a male lead, another wants more fantasy. One wants a current-gen version

hanging, tongues waggling and superlatives flying. One publisher asks us to stay behind after E3 and fly out to their HQ. Cool. Then another does the same. And then another. Rock on!

A four-day trip turns into a two-week odyssey as we tour the States moving further and further up the publishing chain. Before every pitch, I ravage myself with nicotine, caffeine and Red Bull to fight back the effects of insomnia. Despite this, it's great fun to reduce a bunch of po-faced businessmen to hysterics by creating a human kebab from a few enemies and a well-aimed spear.

By the time we get back to the UK we have a string of publishers lined up to come and do their due diligence on us. A 'due diligence' is like an MOT for your business, though it can sometimes feel more like a full-body cavity search.

It's now five weeks before July 31, and we have a bunch of publishers pushing and pulling us in different directions before they will consider a deal. One wants more online stuff, one wants our game to be more contemporary, one wants a male lead, another wants more fantasy. One even wants a current-gen version (everything that *Heavenly Sword* is designed not to be). Arrgh!

With four weeks left, we turn away a couple of publishers so that we can focus on the changes required by the strongest two candidates.

With two weeks left, one publisher is clearly our



This early in-game art style test for *Heavenly Sword* shows off the engine's draw distance, lighting and textures, along with the character modelling of the game's defiantly female protagonist

preferred partner, and so we begin to focus almost exclusively on that.

With one week left, we've agreed headline terms and are ready to sign. Just one tiny hurdle: the US division needs to sign it off. "It's just a formality and there's nothing to worry about," they assure us.

The formality turns into a requisite trip to the US for an informal face-to-face. The informal face-to-face turns into a full-on pitch to 30 of the most powerful men in the games business. We leave them impressed, but there's still no glimpse of a sign-off.

With one day left, we are now back in the UK where Nina gets a phone call. She calls Mike and I into a meeting room: "You guys should sit down."

"Deal done?" we quizzed.

"No. They've decided that they want to own everything, not just the game."

It got worse as Nina continued: "They want to take over the company, move us all down to their HQ to work under their managers and our company would cease to exist."

My heart sank. It's the game development equivalent of being hung, drawn and quartered. It wasn't the idea of being owned that got me; after all, we've been owned by Argonaut for years. It was the idea of the company being completely subsumed – our identity and autonomy vanishing – that disturbed me.

"Let's tell them to stick it!" I said.

"I was going say the exact same thing," added Mike, but Nina calmed us down.

"I'll try and salvage the original deal, but it's not looking good, " she said.

The financial year has come and gone. We have failed to sign a deal. Argonaut's very public financial position is now extinguishing any remaining publisher interest. How did things go from being so good to so bad so fast? To think that we have an original next-gen game that everyone without exception is raving about but which cannot get signed is just so utterly... dispiriting. As if that wasn't enough of a kick in the teeth, things were about to get a whole lot worse over the next few months.



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Blockland

www.blockland.us

Who says the spirit of cooperation is dead? Eric Hartman's *Blockland* – sudden starlet of indie gaming – perfectly captures that spirit and allows like minds to join together online in the boundless construction of interlocking block worlds.

Blockland was created using GarageGames' indie-geared Torque engine (aka the *Tribes 2* engine) and provides the ultimate sandbox experience, perfectly mirroring its source – the original analogue sandbox plaything.

To the delight of those put off by all the niceness, the mod community has become deeply enamoured of *Blockland*, and has created deathmatch scenarios and weapons, allowing you to take part in both demolition and little plastic killing sprees.

To date, Hartman hasn't been contacted by the toy company, but with the faint stirrings of commercial viability beginning to rise, it's just a matter of time. While the patent on the original block design has since passed, the avatars and accessories are still protected, so it's worth grabbing now to say you played it in all its original yellow-headed glory.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Jump Superstars

FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: 2005



Nintendo has chosen to jump-start the *Smash Brothers* line with a manga crossover: characters are hoisted from pages on the touchscreen to participate in the 2D battle on the one above

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows

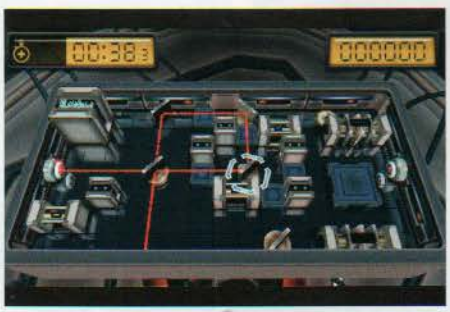
FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY
EXPECTED: Q4 2005



John Romero and ex-Black Isle writer J E Sawyer reinvent *Gauntlet* in as surprising a style as their unexpected union would suggest, switching primary-colour D&D for wild dark fantasy

Smartbomb

FORMAT: PSP
PUBLISHER: EIDOS
EXPECTED: TBA



The first PSP project from Core Design after the Circle Studio migration, this bomb-disposal puzzler looks to be a similarly fraught handheld experience to *Archer Maclean's Mercury*

Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes

FORMAT: XBOX
PUBLISHER: PHANTAGRAM
EXPECTED: TBA



A follow-up to the quietly successful *Crusaders*, *Heroes* should make amends for the cuts to *Crusaders'* Live play with a stronger online front, as well as seven fresh singleplayer campaigns

Bone

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: CARTOON BOOKS
EXPECTED: TBA



Sam & Max 2 refugee Telltale Games announces a project just as appealing as its lost LucasArts title – the first videogame realisation of Jeff Smith's starkly charming indie comic Bone

Shadow Of The Colossus

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: SCEE
EXPECTED: 2005



SCEE finally settles on a title – though arguably one that's no more shelf-friendly than the literal translation – for *Wanda To Kyozo*, and confirms a 2005 release for Fumito Ueda's giant-killer

REDEYE IS…

Civil

It is to be, it seems, a polite conversation. Fine. RedEye was never one to shy away from novelty. But even with that decision made, there are some things that stick in the throat like sharp-snapped twigs. And so the meaningless warble of 'So what do you do?' comes out punctured and flat: is this your job? "Oh, no, I'm a programmer, a computer programmer." Shit. "Well, actually, I don't really do much programming any more. I'm really a salesman." Shit. "I sell software to drug companies – it's quite a fast-growing field, actually, very high-powered." Shit. "And you?" Shit.

The introduction of the subject of videogames does not speed the conversation along. ("Bit trivial, really. And I wouldn't let my children play them. So antisocial!"), but then the unthinkable happens and he says something interesting: "The problem with all our Japanese staff is that they have no imagination. Honestly, Japanese programmers are so timid, so conventional. We have to show them how to do *everything*. Can you believe it?" RedEye looks down at his bag. In it is a DS and a copy of *Catch! Touch! Yoshi*. RedEye shakes his head.

Interesting, nonetheless. Look at the biographies of good Japanese game makers, and you see a totally straightforward career path. Degrees in maths and engineering and computing dovetailing into jobs at Konami and Capcom and Tecmo. One half of the class must have gone into gaming and the other into drug research software. One half of the class must have had a sense of creativity, curiosity, possibility. The other didn't. And so for every well-nourished cube farm of a Japanese devco, there must be a slack-jawed warehouse of IT automatons, whipped into shape by this lumpbrained idiot. The bland leading the bland. Just not very far.

There's no doubting his conviction. His utter contempt for the Japanese IT industry is plain. And if he's right, then gaming is siphoning off the very minds which that industry needs to repair its reputation, the creative thinkers, the inventors, the leaders. If he's right, gaming is hurting Japan's ability to compete on the 'civilian' side of software design. Not so trivial, all of a sudden.

Politeness is the process of repeating things the other person says with a question on the end. "You don't really do much programming any more?" It used to be military stuff, he explains. Aviation. Threat detection and prioritisation programs. Stuff the human brain is too slow to handle. Sounds stressful, RedEye suggests. Does it still keep you awake at night? "Does what?" Wondering if one mistake might cost someone their life? Blank astonishment. "No, not at all. I mean, I'd never really thought… I mean, if there was a mistake I suppose… well, yes, I suppose it… I'd never thought of it like that. Oh. Shit."

A polite conversation. Not a toothless one.

*RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with those of **Edge** magazine*

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



I went to watch Godzilla: Final Wars...

Game producer Brick Bardo takes a trip to the movies



As Toho, the movie studio behind the Godzilla series, said, this will be Godzilla's last movie. Well, they already said that when Roland Emmerich made the Hollywood version in 1998 and a few years before in 1995 with Godzilla Vs Destroyer. I would not be surprised if in a few years from now a new movie is made again. Anyway, Godzilla: Final Wars' director is named Ryuhei Kitamura. He was in charge of the cut-scenes and the motion in Konami's *Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes* for the GameCube. And the movie is... how to say... well, what's the point in copying The Matrix now? You sense no love for sci-fi and monster movies in Final Wars. I would have many criticisms to make about this movie, but it would not be a good use of your time. Instead I'd like to tell you about Godzilla: the most powerful and famous character Japan has ever given birth to.

Godzilla's fame stems from the work of two men: Eiji Tsuburaya's incomparable creativity and Ishiro Honda's direction. There is a common and famous story which explains how Tsuburaya was highly influenced by the movie King Kong in his making of Godzilla. But it is more than that. Godzilla is not just about making a living thing bigger than normal. By electrifying his dorsal fin and then shooting radioactivity from his mouth, they managed to create a living creature that was nothing like anything created before. And again, in Japan in the '60s, they managed to give this unnatural and in some ways absurd character an overwhelming sense of reality. To achieve this, they demonstrated an incredible level of expertise in special effects.

However, in the '70s, Japanese movie knowhow gradually lost its momentum in the face of a revolution. The '70s were marked by a great jump forward in movie technology, mostly thanks to Hollywood and a series of blockbusters like 2001: A Space Odyssey, Star Wars, Close Encounters Of The Third Kind, etc. These movies changed the industry forever. Why did Japan lose its lead? Well, I believe that it was because we are Japanese. What supported this high-level special effects knowhow, highly recognised all over the world, were naturally skilful hands. If you find a Japanese person, try asking him this: "Can you make me an Oritsuru [origami bird] with this piece of paper?"

Godzilla is not just about making a living thing bigger than normal. By electrifying his dorsal fin and then shooting radioactivity from his mouth, they managed to create a living creature that was nothing like anything before

You will be surprised how most Japanese can do it easily. With these skilful hands, the Japanese managed to make detailed miniatures, a careful composition to deliver great special effects. The only problem is that movies are not craft objects, but one of the most advanced forms of entertainment. Leaving past wonders in the past, by making new movies with the inheritance of past knowhow, Japan's special effects industry rapidly felt its age. Maybe American and European movie creators did not have the same skilful hands, but



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they have created some world-leading techniques in motion control and cinematography. They have created a way to deliver these impressive special effects without the need for these skilful hands, in a totally new way from the Godzilla model.

Don't you think this sounds similar to something else? It reminds me of videogames. Ten years ago, Japan was dominating the videogame industry. But now, the US and Europe have caught up and in many ways they have taken the lead. That does not mean Japanese games are over. Not at all. I still believe we do a better job when it comes to character design and movement, special effects and game balance. Maybe it is a Japanese point of view, but when I look at female characters from US and Japanese games, I find the American characters unattractive most of the time, to say the least. However, if you consider game systems, development systems and technology, I think Japan is several steps behind the US and Europe. It is like the Japanese movie special effects story – we are still working like skilled craftsmen making beautiful miniatures.

The Japanese videogame industry, like the animation industry, is walking down the path previously followed by the special effects industry. I think the time when our videogame industry will proudly make trash like Godzilla: Final Wars is not that far off. If some major game makers don't invest and change the course we are following before this happens, I fear that in a few years the decline of Japanese games will be irreversible.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Archer MacLean's Mercury



Complex physics wrapped in lustrous liquid metal: the more we see of Archer Maclean's elegantly simple PSP puzzler, the more we want to pour ourselves all over it.
PSP, IGNITION

Nintendogs



It was looking unstoppable enough, but the perfectly pitched packaging of *Nintendogs* is likely to unleash a monster, albeit an immeasurably cute one. Irresistible.
DS, NINTENDO

Meteos



The downloadable demo that's available from Japanese DS pods reveals that the sister puzzler to *Lumines* is every bit as engrossing and several bits more frantic.
DS, NINTENDO

The first shall be last

Why Sony's waiting game might be good news for us all



There's no question that what's been seen so far of *The Godfather* has been both technically and aesthetically impressive. However, the lack of demonstrable PS2 code indicates the challenge of getting these results from ageing hardware

There's a problem with EA's intention to convert The Godfather into a game, but it isn't the one you might think. It's a nerve-racking proposition: one of cinema's most treasured achievements given over to a company not renowned for its creative sensitivity. And the implications run even wider: just how much might change if gaming proves its ability to take on this kind of serious source material? How much might change if it proves it can't? It's a pivotal moment, a game that carries with it the potential to shape the next ten years of game development.

And it's being designed around five-year-old technology. Despite some extraordinary accomplishments in the last 12 months, there's no question that the PS2 is showing its age. The inability of EA itself to find a way to produce the Xbox's *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* on the platform indicates just how unbridgeable the gap is between the consoles. Only time will tell how the subtle visual tones of *Resident Evil 4* fare when it makes the backwards leap. But the PS2's dominance means that it was always going to be the benchmark, and it would be folly for EA to aim *The Godfather* at anything else. Next generation, however, it looks like all this might change. Microsoft's determination to get to market first makes it certain that the new Xbox will be the old man of the new kids to come. The GameCube, despite Nintendo's determination to play the hardware business as a long game, is running out of steam. It's the PS2, despite its age, which has the most life left in it.

And it's that factor which starts the PS3 in such a strong position. It's hard to concoct a plausible fantasy in which Sony throws its lead away, or in which Microsoft leapfrogs its market share. And so, for the next generation, the benchmark may well be the frontline of console technology, not the backstop. And that's a state of affairs that promises to revolutionise gaming far more irrefutably than anything the Godfather could ever offer.

















The degree to which the game resembles a certain N64 classic is often remarkable. Just look at the guards, the guns, the complex scenery. OK, so things may have moved on a touch







down to knowing which technical fights you can win and which you can't – you then cut your cloth to fit."

If there's an achievement beyond the looks, though, it lies in conjuring up that trickiest of assets – personality. In spinning its tale, *Cold Winter* stops via a wealth of evocative locales where characters speak their native tongues and events are propelled both by in-game cues and rendered cut-scenes (though Widdows downplays the prevalence of the latter). Enemies go about their business until you become their business and, when they engage, they do so with conviction and character. When in squads, they advance in formation before breaking off in twos to flank and overwhelm the player, bounding and suppressing with volleys of fire as their commander remains concealed in the distance. Take him out, and the squad collapses to the base level of AI, no longer pepper-potting between items of scenery, instead charging forth without any thought of self-preservation.

What's striking is how, as it meanders cleanly between homage and innovation, the game justifies those three development years. With each bullet, for example, bodies writhe and limbs scatter, explosions scattering nearby enemies high into the air – the feeling of the thrill kill is *GoldenEye* incarnate. Those features that were impressive last year are more so now – the ability to detonate a foe's grenade while it's still clipped to their belt remains a highlight, not least when you consider that different types of grenade are recognised. The game is replete with features that enrich the experience while never once proving vital to the completion of an objective, such is the team's dedication to the creed Widdows revealed last year: "Anything we can do to allow people who want to finish the game to get there has to be considered and if possible acted upon."

They advance in formation before breaking off in twos to flank and overwhelm the player, bounding and suppressing with volleys of fire as their commander remains concealed

Here, then, is the crux: can *Cold Winter* reconcile the need to satisfy the hardcore while remaining accessible to that 80 per cent of gamers who, as Sony once said, never reach the end? We're told that testing has suggested a game length of 15 hours for the game's campaign – no patsy, but no marathon either. Hardcore players may (and probably will) balk at the fact you can't adjust look sensitivity beyond its default setting, but we're assured that it's all part of the plan to avoid "options that would allow the player to degrade the experience for themselves." Only when we're given a thorough look can we tell if the difficulty levels and, crucially, the generously stocked multiplayer mode can deliver the long-term goods. If they can (and, from what's been seen, they may well do) then Sony's console may finally have its FPS golden gun.



Combination locks

Rather than potentially alienate the non-hobbyist gamer, *Cold Winter* chooses to add an entirely optional layer of complexity to its immediately accessible core. The prime example is the Combined Items screen, wherein the player can assemble collected parts into otherwise unobtainable tools and weapons. This is entirely inessential to the completion of the game's objectives, but has the potential for dramatically boosting its appeal. Consider, for example, the creation of lock picks: they won't unlock any important doors, but they'll grant access to minor receptacles and locations where bonus content may be found. Certain weapons, we're assured, will only be available to players willing to explore. The implications of creating Molotov cocktails, of course, speak for themselves, not least when a bundle of would-be assailants is bashing down the door.





Taking as many cues from PC shooters as from those bound to a console, the game encourages the tipping and dragging of objects for use as cover and obstruction. Thankfully, the control system makes it simple



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**
ORIGIN: **USA**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E125, E138, E140, E141**



World Of WarCraft

From a shaky start as a Continent Of WarCraft, Blizzard's fantasy of an accessible MMO takes hold across the globe

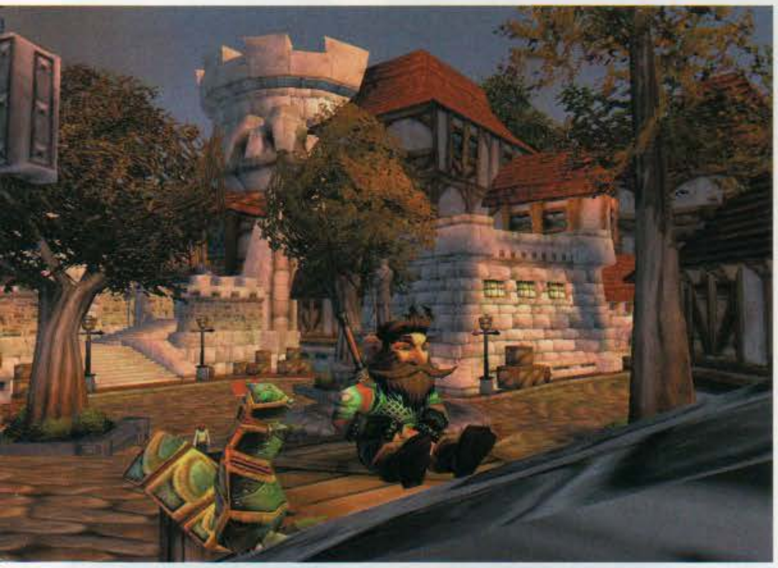
It was the launch that had European gamers holding their breath. Not in anticipation for the game, although after the rapturous response to the lengthy beta tests that could hardly have been higher, but in curiosity to see if the servers would stand up. After the chaos of the US launch gave way to a steady grind of frustration and dissatisfaction, the question was no longer whether Blizzard's first foray into the MMORPG world would be a success, but of how much success it could stand.

The answer, on the day, was not quite enough. The servers went down, preventing new players from registering, and catcalls started to rise, suggesting that despite the US experience, Blizzard wasn't ready. These proved premature, however. Now, despite the presence of a large flag warning players off the most popular servers and the infrequent but inescapable disconnections, Europe's *World Of WarCraft* has stabilised.

This is an enormous relief – not just for players but because it means the technical talk can cease and attention focus instead on the exceptionally engaging world that Blizzard has created. There's no question that the core gameplay can be boiled down to 'go there, kill those, come back', but Azeroth offers up this basic recipe with subtle charm. The world itself is absolutely vast. New players ask each other timidly 'How much have you seen?' and the answer is always the same: not enough. From the gleaming savannah of The Barrens to the sinister luxuriance of Elwynn Forest, each location is rich with character and beauty. The draw of seeing somewhere new is the single strongest motivation in the game – a strong claim to fame for a genre so dominated by the lure of levelling up. As you make your way from the camps and wastelands where you first spawn to the prodigious cities where you'll make your name, you can sense in each new place that it is somewhere memories will be made.

> New players ask each other timidly 'How much have you seen?' and the answer is always the same: not enough. Seeing somewhere new is the single strongest motivation

What memories those are will depend in part on your race and your role. Blizzard has worked hard to make real differences between classes and peoples, and in the most part this is successful. The price you pay for their evolution beyond the basic brute/thief/mage/priest equation is that it's hard to be sure how much you'll enjoy what your character slowly grows into. There's little room for manoeuvre once you commit: although you can shape their development,





The day/night cycle of the European servers is synced to CET, and as a consequence many players will only get a chance to see sunlight during daytime weekend sessions







The scale of *WOW*'s cities is astonishing, and can be acutely intimidating to first-time visitors. With time you start to feel like a local, stopping to give nervous newcomers directions





Crucial for speeding up the multiplayer game is the Hearthstone, a tool which lets each player set any town as his home, and warp there instantly to meet up with friends



there's no swapping of classes, no chance for warriors to take up witchcraft. Pick well, and you'll set off with a character you'll love being. Pick poorly, and you'll be faced with the prospect of starting all over again with a new face and a new name.

But *World Of WarCraft*'s secret weapon is that this prospect isn't a daunting one. As the team intended, they've produced a game which is quick. Dedicated players can race through the first ten levels in a handful of hours, and nowhere are you required to fall into the pattern of repetition and thumb twiddling that other MMOs make a necessity. Progress is swift and sure – and, curiously, swiftest and surest for those playing on their own.

There's no doubting that the balance of *WOW* currently rests with the singleplayer game. The strength of its stories, woven together from mistrust, rebellion, deception and exploitation, reveal themselves most satisfyingly to the solo adventurer. Interlocking quest structures, where tasks feed in to each other, make it frustrating to try to slot together an evening of play with players not following your exact path through the game. Even the sense of exploration can be dulled by the presence of chit-chatting companions.

As a consequence, multiplay becomes about just that: play. Friends meeting up to help each other out, to visit a favourite location or work together on a pointless but irresistible quest to make a mechanical squirrel. It ceases to be about ruthlessly harvesting EXP, and this shift adds a vibrancy, a sense that the world really is alive, that the people you meet really are people. It's also in groups that the value of the profession system becomes clear, as friends collaborate on engineering projects and form impromptu sewing circles. It's also with others that the true value of each of the character classes becomes plain. Fighting quickly becomes technical and skilled, requiring a balance of different attack types to sustain yourself through each battle. Each class doesn't just have its own complexities, it has enough subtleties that players adapt their fighting patterns around the make-up of each team they join, ensuring that even the amiable aimlessness of much of the multiplayer game remains fresh and satisfying.

There's no question that, despite *WOW*'s brilliance, despite its beauty, intelligence and invention, Blizzard's inexperience shows. The clumsiness of the PVP system has been widely (and rightly) criticised by players seduced by the idea of a world where thousands of people dedicated themselves to the craft of war. Other bugs and imbalances remain, and will do for some time as the team works its way down the list of problems and complaints. But the promised arrival of Battlegrounds (see box, right) will change, at a fundamental level, the nature of the game, bridging the gap between the PvP hardcore and the solo gentleman adventurers more ingeniously than any game before it. It's impossible to shake the sense that the *WOW* of six months' time is the *WOW* we should have been playing all along.

And that's why the game isn't making an appearance in this month's review section. But it would be foolish to let what isn't yet there discourage you from experiencing what is. *WarCraft* comes close to being what MMOs have needed almost since they were invented: a fresh pair of eyes, a sharp mind, an enthusiastic heart and a lavish, luminous vision. In Blizzard's case, it seems, there's no substitute for inexperience.



Our town is under attack!

The Battlegrounds are to put the *WarCraft* back into *WOW*, providing designated areas for Horde and Alliance teams to fight for territory in attempts to sack the other side's base camp. Lower-level characters will be able to participate in a supply-running role rather than on the front lines, and all present earn Honour, the still-to-be-implemented in-game reward for PvP play.

FORMAT: **ARCADE**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE/NINTENDO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Mario Kart Arcade

Are you sitting down? Nintendo has handed development of its precious Mario Kart franchise over to Namco



It's not yet fully clear how important coin collecting will be to your GP career: it may simply build racing speed, or it might be saveable via the IC Card system in Japan



It's-a-me, Me!

One of the advantages of the Race On cabinet on which *MKA:GP* is based is the Nam-Cam 2 system, which allows players to display their own picture above their character during the race. The game also supports the IC Card system, allowing players to track their own personal progress through the game, as well as giving them access to items they've unlocked.

It was, without question, the biggest news of AOU. It's hard to know what came as the greatest surprise – the sight of Mario kitted out in a cabinet, or the word Namco stuck next to his most famous franchise. Nintendo, it was clear, didn't underestimate the impact the game would have. Miyamoto was on hand, via an LCD display, to reassure and explain. The game was designed, he said, to bring Mario to a larger audience, to turn the franchise into a family day out. Disarmingly, he confessed that he hadn't been sure Namco would 'get' the right *Mario Kart* feel (an understandable concern, especially if he'd recently been playing *Star Fox: Assault*), but early builds apparently reassured him that he'd made the right choice.

First indications are that he was correct to be persuaded. *MK:AGP* is an incarnation of everything you would expect from an arcade conversion. Supporting up to four players, there are 11 characters to choose from: the eight Nintendo stalwarts (Mario, Luigi, Peach, Yoshi, Wario, Donkey, Toad and Koopa) combined with three Namco characters (Pac-Man, Ms Pac-Man and a Pac-Man Ghost). There are six worlds, each of which has four stages, gradually increasing in difficulty.

The biggest change is in how items are used. Before each game starts, each player must select three items from a huge range of up to 100 power-ups and attacks. This suite of three items will then become their arsenal for the race, picked up from the question-mark blocks in the usual way. Not all 100 will be available to all players – some are only unlocked after winning certain races, while others are only open in singleplayer GPs.



The staples of Mario's racetracks – lava levels, beach circuits and dirt tracks – are all here, but there's a good amount of imagination on show, softening the game's traditional crisp presentation with cherry blossom and beautiful natural deta

If this development is new, however, one element is pure, vintage *Mario Kart*: the perfectly pitched unfairness of the races. Rather than relying on supplying endless lightning strikes to the player in last place, Namco is unveiling a new 'rubber band' solution to player catch-up, so that no one should stay lagging in last place for long. However, exactly what this rubber-band system entails isn't yet known; nor is it clear whether it will guarantee tight races, or rob the game of its skill and challenge.

The controls are a very straightforward evolution of the joypad system. The sit-down cabinet's two pedals, brake and accelerate, can be hit together to make your character jump, which ensures the game's trademark skids will make it into the arcade version. As things stand, these are a little tricky to pull off, but there is still plenty of time for fine-tuning. Once you've collected an item, it's fired with a satisfyingly big blue button in the centre of the steering wheel. It could hardly be more in the spirit of *Mario Kart* – full-size bumper cars to match the boisterous fun of the original. All in all, it seems a very promising debut from a game most people gave up pining for years ago.



Miyamoto's determination to make *Mario Kart Arcade: Grand Prix* family friendly extends to the early track design, which is simple enough to be digestible for even the most inexperienced gamer – or driver







The sight of *Pac-Man* driving one of Mario's karts is unsettling partly because he's a Namco interloper invading some of Nintendo's most carefully guarded IP, but also because he doesn't really have any arms or leg



In reconstructing the movies' pivotal scenes, the game isn't afraid to take liberties with either cast or content, as the Darth Maul encounter proves

For those moments when a thirdperson action adventure simply won't do, surprises such as this *Zaxxon*-esque shooter amply fit the bill. Fleeting and basic as they may be, they still score maximum points for nostalgia





FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **GIANT**
DEVELOPER: **TRAVELLER'S TALES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **APRIL 22**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E141**

Lego Star Wars

Injection-moulded and mould-breaking, Traveller's Tales' toybox extravaganza brings two far away galaxies ever closer together

Ask anyone what they think is wrong with the new Star Wars films and they'll reel off the same grievances as the person next door – expressionless characters, characterless machines and mechanical storytelling. Timely, then, is our return to *Lego Star Wars* – a game with characters made of plastic, machines cobbled from giant blocks and a story stripped and dissected to its barest bones. Funnily enough, this apparent child's play packs more charisma and instant appeal every time we see it.

Here is something that reminds us how important it is, above all, to love your work. On the surface, it's a somewhat cynical idea that doesn't even explore the great potential offered by Lego. It celebrates not the ability to build but, instead, the disarmingly simple aesthetic of little beings with moulded hair, crescent hands and painted-on clothes. It does, however – as is increasingly apparent in each build – execute its brief with painstaking finesse. This is Star Wars enacted by anatomically perfect Lego people, thinking and acting with perfectly-imagined (we assume) Lego brains in an eclectic Lego world. In its emerging structure, it follows a dedicated Lego creed – small, abundant parts working together to great effect.

Traveller's Tales' direction will doubtlessly separate gamers (and fans) into two camps. Those who appreciate the unpretentious value of the toybox will revel amid the avalanche of playful distractions; those expecting absolutely anything else can effectively disengage their interest. Beyond amassing the 56 unlockable characters – all of which are meticulously animated – the game features a wealth of collectable ships (trophies, essentially) that require dedicated pursuit of its many puzzles and locations. Most of these, at some point, require the use of Force powers to either reconstruct or operate designated objects. This remains a limited ability, functionally on par with any traditional lever or switch, but is used to innovative effect, not least when two players work together.



In true *Project Gotham* style, the game's grandiose hangar gives players a wealth of unlockable ships to savour, their components scattered around each level

What continues to both impress and amaze is the degree to which the game subverts and restages the key moments from those first three episodes. You can imagine the Lucas illuminati pounding at the studio gates, hysterical at the gay abandon being pumped into its zealously guarded IP. But in a month that's seen the soulless *Republic Commando* highlight the series' shortcomings, perhaps they actually appreciate someone grabbing its slivers of charm and amplifying them with an irreverent wink and smile.

There are problems that'll presumably be addressed – the AI you're teamed with in singleplayer needs tweaking, as do some of the stages where the game hops out of its action adventure mode and dabbles elsewhere. Rest assured, though, should the forthcoming *Empire At War* and *Revenge Of The Sith* fall flat on their faces, a game like this might just see the franchise hop out of its grave.



As well as a vendor that sells playable characters and information, the lobby provides a level-select for when you inevitably go back for those well-concealed items



LEGO TECHNIQUES

Controlling *Lego Star Wars* couldn't be simpler: typically, one face button fires a weapon, another jumps while a third employs puzzle-solving skills such as the Force. Differing with each of the many characters you can take (in Free Play mode, at least) through a single level, the available range of abilities never fails to keep things interesting. With Jedi characters in particular, the combinations of jump and strike can produce awesome results. Yoda, for one, will dismiss his walking stick and ambling stride when his weapon is drawn, instead becoming a whirling dervish of light. Characters can be so excessive in their technique that killing either yourself or your partner through misadventure becomes entirely possible – a good job, then, that your lives are unlimited. Considering the lengths of time it takes to fully plunder some locations, this can only be a good thing.





The designers at Monolith Soft have had to create the majority of the game's attack sequences: while Ryu (below right) has plenty of source material to draw on, how Klonoa (below) handles himself in a fight is another matter









FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH SOFT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MAY**

Namco X Capcom

It's a case of Rival Developers: United By Market Conditions as two giants let their powers combine

The new strategy-RPG from Namco subsidiary Monolith surely represents the fever pitch of the current Japanese climate for all-you-can-cram-in figurehead titles. Originally Namco-invite only to celebrate the company's 50th anniversary, it was decided after two years of development that the 100-strong cast couldn't guarantee the game's success. Namco's solution was one unthinkable in a more thriving videogame market: a pairing with another company as character-driven as its own.

Though Capcom itself has little involvement with the project other than supervising the use of its characters – whose dream-team pairings will doubtless be treated in a more wholesome manner than can be found on Japanese bulletin boards – Capcom's R&D head and renaissance man Keiji Inafune spoke animatedly at *NXC*'s announcement. Obviously passionate about both Namco and Capcom's character rosters, having created several of Capcom's himself during his tenure as a character designer, he feels that surprisingly few remain in the spotlight today, and sees projects like *NXC* as a chance to revive interest among both former fans and latter-day gamers.

NXC currently features a little over 200 characters, each with new 2D sprites and full voice acting – the former a delight, the latter more of a mixed outcome, as some previously mute figures have acquired inappropriately excitable anime-style vocals. It's likely the playable headcount will clock in at a more manageable 60 or so heroes, with the rest relegated to villainous roles or fan-pleasing cameo appearances.

Reminiscing over an arcade youth aside, the game itself is a fairly conservative SRPG in every aspect save the battle system, which seems inspired by the fighter heritage of its father companies. Attack commands are issued with a timed sequence of D-pad button presses (although Namco did not indicate whether these arrangements were random or character-specific) and can be strung into ground or aerial combos with suitably flashy results. Below the action are two gauges, Hissatu (special) and Kizetsu (feint), which once filled can provide access to further supermoves via the face buttons. Characters operating in pairs can combine their attacks on an unfortunate opponent, and a further multiple assault technique allows the player's entire team to participate in roughing up a target. The choreography for the resulting sequences suggests that regardless of how the game's other content stacks up against the competition, it'll be a worthwhile purchase for series devotees as an interactive movie alone.

But if the power of its licences can guarantee sales on faith, renewing that faith in characters thrust into the spotlight after years of absence falls to the quality of the game. Inafune indicated that positive receptions for any of the game's cast could see them drawn out of retirement for future titles: surely even the most ardent fan of originality would agree that Strider Hiryu and Wonder Momo cruelly hung up their sword or knee-high boots too soon.



Welcome to the stage of history

The list of *NXC*'s donor titles is yet to be finalised, with several popular (and obvious) choices notable by their absence. Among those confirmed at the presentation were *Soul Calibur*, *Tales Of…*, *Xenosaga*, *Tekken* and *Klonoa* from the Namco side and *Street Fighter*, *Vampire*, *Rival Schools*, *Ghosts 'N' Goblins*, *Dino Crisis* and *Strider* from Capcom's camp.



Stages are viewed from a standard isometric perspective (above centre) until battle is joined. A freshly redrawn Morrigan sprite (above) seems miraculous enough, let alone one duking it out in the world of *Ghouls 'N' Ghosts*









Left to snuffle around a room, Hewie can root out items: his growls and barks also provide advance warning of danger



Some paths through the Belli castle cannot be traversed by Hewie, so finding the dog-accessible routes is an early priority





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (PROD STUDIO 1)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 29 (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E143 (AS DEMENTO)**

Haunting Ground

No 'Welcome To Alchemic Canine Psychological Horror' splash? It's certainly not your ordinary Capcom chiller



Though Belli can crouch and hide in any area, specifically designated locations, such as under beds, provide extra cover

To those still gunning down *Resident Evil 4*'s bloodthirsty throng in film-grained widescreen, *Haunting Ground* might look like the ghost of an expired genre. But for all the survival horror traditions it upholds – a sudden-death trap here, a sliding-block puzzle there – there are just as many it confounds, as moments that could predictably shriek blood and death instead whisper some new unease. The atmosphere isn't one of abject menace, but fear of the unexpected: lead character Fiona Belli's ancestral castle is so malevolent in its desertion that it's almost a relief when her pursuer lurches into view.

That's pursuer in the singular, taking note from the *Clock Tower* series (along with some of its production team) that one relentless foe is as fearsome as a graveyard's worth of idly shambling ones. While other shady figures occasionally cross your path, it's unfriendly giant Debilitas that Belli spends much of the early game in flight from – the thrill of the hunt(ed) heightened by a migraine-inducing audiovisual treatment.

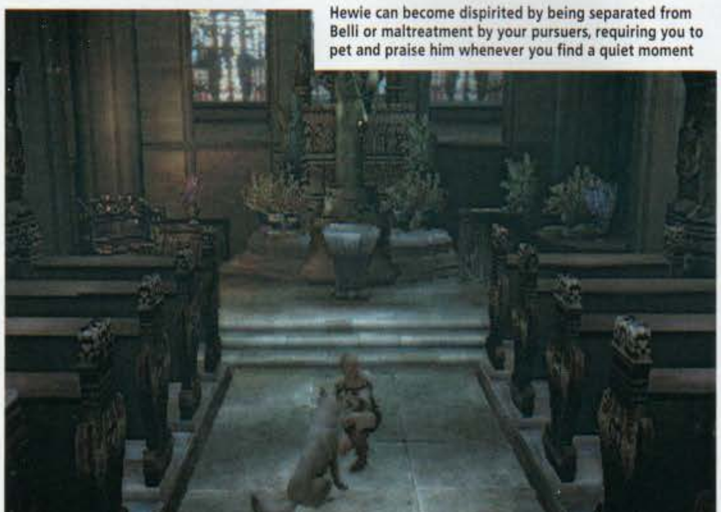
Fumbling to interact with doors or hiding places can sometimes provide a more unintentional sense of panic, but it's still more assured than *Clock Tower*, and all the more harrowing for the lack of explicit gore. She's a girl born to look haunted, wide-eyed and porcelain-cheeked, and the motion capture and in-game cut-scene direction add surprising emotional clout.

As if looking out for herself wasn't enough, Belli soon rescues a German shepherd dog, Hewie, from the same coldly perverse treatment as the castle staff have shown her. Even if you're more of a cat person, Hewie has such convincing animal honesty that he's the only element of the game able to be taken at face value – and in a clever subversion of the standard player-and-partner rules, it's Hewie that provides the muscle for a frail Belli. Debilitas can be driven off by repeated savaging, but in addition to spurring the dog on to attack, you must also ensure he's called back to safety should Debilitas turn on him.

Managing the relationship between girl and dog proves an important sideline to unravelling the game's murkily unguessable plot, as the more care, attention and companionship Hewie receives, the more dutifully he responds to commands. Ensuring they're kept together, hopeful and safe while the environment threatens to deny all three, makes *Haunting Ground* oddly compelling, as does assembling the jigsaw of the castle's structure. Hide-and-seek tension aside, it's a slow-burning experience – intended to play out like a bad dream, but at risk of slipping into sleepwalking for less willing players.

The other risk is that it may never be able to resolve the questions piled on questions of its opening hour, and an easy resolution could cheapen all that wonderful unease. But there's evidence here that a dog just might teach survival horror new tricks.

Hewie can become dispirited by being separated from Belli or maltreatment by your pursuers, requiring you to pet and praise him whenever you find a quiet moment





As Belli succumbs to panic, visuals bleach and strobe in time with her pounding heart: should the situation worsen, she'll break into a blind, barely controllable dash



Irrational's attention to detail extends even to copying the moire patterns and dots that characterized printing in the '60s, a technique itself pastiched in Roy Liechtenstein's oeuvre



Arch bad guy Fortissimo is a large, bald fascist who's half Mussolini and half Pavarotti. His chief weapon is a piercing singing voice that disorientates and damages anyone caught within its vortex-like range

Freedom Force Vs The 3rd Reich

The Second World War is hardly short of games, but Irrational's novel super heroics ensure this is no wartime surplus

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **DIGITAL JESTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL 15**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E145**

Irrational's 2002 release *Freedom Force* lovingly paid homage to the Silver Age of comic books, evoking the early '60s at Marvel – the time of Stan Lee, Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby – with episodic, realtime tactics that were part RTS and part RPG. It proved a triumph of style over content in the best possible way: the sheer brio with which Irrational told the tale making up for the awkward camera and stop-start play. That same storytelling panache is joyously present again in the sequel, with refinements to the mechanics seeking to address the original's shortcomings.

Still staying just the right side of parody, *Freedom Force Vs The 3rd Reich* pitches the team back to the Second World War to tackle Axis supervillain Blitzkrieg. A new story, then, but much the same feel to play, it would seem, with the player still pausing the game, selecting characters, giving them orders, then unpausing and reacting, as needed, on the fly. The main change to the engine sees the player able to fully rotate a level – a welcome addition that certainly makes it easier to navigate in confined spaces and get a clearer view of the more hectic brawls.

Superpowers have been altered, too, with characters now typically having one melee and one ranged attack they can use constantly without reducing their power bar. All the rest of their powers drain large chunks of this supply, forcing the player to use them sparingly. A subtle improvement, but one that ensures every team member has a use and is never stuck, power bar empty, being little more than cannon fodder. It also ties in neatly with improved AI for the heroes, with the team members you're not directly in control of engaging nearby foes with their basic attacks. The same self-defence mechanism kicks in if heroes are attacked somewhere en route – in the original, they could quickly be picked off if you let your guard slip. It's a change that frees you from the donkey work of mothering every hero all the time and, together with the refined powers system, makes it a more fluid affair than the first *FF*. There's been no change to the camera angles, though, always looking at things from above and rarely flattering the designs, even when zoomed in close.

It looks like the story and characterisation are what will distinguish *Freedom Force Vs The 3rd Reich*, but the thing to remember is that the style is very much the substance here, the game seemingly more of a way to appreciate the tale rather than an end in itself. Another interactive comic book, then, but one thoroughly worth reading on the evidence so far.



FFv3R's setting has allowed Irrational's artists wider – and wilder – scope for the kind of imagery that leapt off the pages of the comics the game celebrates







There's a Rumble Room, akin to the X-Men's Danger Room, which allows you to pitch custom teams of characters against each other. A similar feature was added as a patch to the original *Freedom Force*, but only served to underline how crucial the story was to the game's success



No more heroes?

Like a beat 'em up sequel in search of a selling point, *FFv3R* introduces new heroes to supplement the original team. Tombstone is a wrongly convicted murderer who survives the electric chair and gains an array of necromantic powers in the process. Green Genie lacks physical attacks but can transform enemies into bunches of flowers or useful minions, while Quetzalcoatl is imbued with the spirit of a South American snake god. However, the more esoteric the powers, the less immediately useful they'll be, with most missions needing little more than ranged and melee attacks.







With the developers' attention heaped upon its glittering visuals, *Dub Edition* retains an arcade handling model that serves it well

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL 4**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E142**

Midnight Club: Dub Edition

More revving, tyre squealing and arguments about whether it's Lexus or Lexi, but can a magazine's endorsement really boost sales?





"House real big, cars real big, belly real big, everything real big," brags Mannie Fresh as his rap 'anthem' accompanies your initial introduction to *Dub Edition*. It's an appropriate tune, because this is one huge game. A few hours in and you'll find you've barely scratched the surface.

But big is not always better, and from the code we've played there's a sense that *Dub Edition*'s content may have been stretched too thinly. The format is now familiar: you're given a modest wad of notes to buy a basic vehicle, then you have the freedom of the city to cruise around looking for trouble. Or rather races that can win you respect and money to pimp your motor or buy even more powerful rides. But the lack of any kind of narrative, or greater goal other than getting 100 per cent completion, gives *Dub Edition* the sensibilities of a treadmill rather than a compelling joyride of discovery.

This is at an unfinished stage, however, and the game's lack of urgency and purpose could merely be a result of this. It's also odd that races early on in the game (through the streets of San Diego) are aggressive, highly competitive affairs yet the difficulty soon slides downwards to the point where you're winning everything with little trouble. A good deal of work still needs to be done on balancing rival AI to keep things challenging.

Visually, this is a world away from the previous instalments, and the almost hypnotic blurring and tracing effects are splendidly done – especially against the rainy, dark urban skylines. Neon against grey is still the defining look, but there's more nuance now and even at high speeds it's possible to navigate the streets with confidence. And while there doesn't seem to be any overarching goal, the racing itself can be exhilarating regardless: if the licence is Dub, the flavour is often pure Blues Brothers, with jumps, police roadblocks, buildings to smash through and exploding gas stations featuring in many of the circuits.

Predictably, *Dub Edition* is likely to fall somewhere in between its two main rivals. It's playing better than *NFS Underground 2*, but falls short of the honed kinetic excesses of *Burnout 3*. What could differentiate it, though, are a number of online modes that include Capture The Flag, Tag and Frenzy games. Played against AI rivals these are already enjoyable; with reliable servers and continued support *Dub Edition* could spawn a dedicated fan community. Ironically, it might be the little games that give this title its biggest boost.



The series continues its visual love affair with the ethereal glamour of illegal street racing. With its neon trails and electric streets, the game happily indulges in an Akira-style hyper-reality



Rub-a-dub-dub

It's not clear how far reaching Dub's influence runs in the game, although it certainly gives it a certain cachet among car mod fans. More manufacturers have been brought into the fold and these include Cadillac, Mercedes, Mitsubishi and Chrysler, but it's also possible to ride on two wheels with bikes officially licensed from Ducati, Kawasaki and Hotmatch. Of course, a large part of the game's appeal comes from beefing up your vehicles with new parts and dolling them up with decals and spray paint – and in this department *Dub Edition* is no slouch. Thousands of combinations are possible, but though many vehicles may look different, the handling does not yet appear to be so finely nuanced.



Say what you like about the culture of transforming expensive cars into expensive pimped-out Christmas trees, but *Dub Edition* cuts no corners in portraying it

Fahrenheit

Lionhead may be making The Movies, but Quantic Dream is creating just one – and wants to share



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAMS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E132**

It's a rare game – and a rare game director – that can one-up Hideo Kojima's knowing post-modernism in the tutorial alone, but it was evident from our first look at *Fahrenheit* in **E**132 that it was no ordinary project. David Cage spoke then about wanting the player to 'co-direct' his thriller's story, an intent that's made clear when the tutorial opens on a *Fahrenheit* movie set with a casually dressed Cage talking you through the controls.

And while Kojima has incrementally, but minutely, relaxed control over his cinematics to the player by allowing (restricted) pans and zooms, Cage wants you to frame his thriller as you see fit. Each location is shot from several camera angles that can be flicked between at any time, and within a shot the camera can be panned freely in thirdperson or firstperson view. As the parallel stories of an unwilling murderer and the NYPD duo on his trail through a frozen New York play out, it's possible to cut between characters with similar ease.

This integration of cinematic technique into gameplay itself, rather than as bookends for it, could make *Fahrenheit* involving on a level above that of its storyline. There's a sense that you're free to take as much or as little from the game's material as you wish: whether breathlessly keeping pace with the protagonists or pausing to document every last detail of their lives.

Atari seems to be proving a sympathetic new publisher, though some of Cage's auterism may be slightly curbed to improve *Fahrenheit's* chances beyond an arthouse audience: expect a more in-depth look at the game here in the future.



***Fahrenheit* constantly experiments with multi-screen camerawork, sometimes to show concurrent events or herald an approaching character, other times simply for effect**





Some games struggle to tell a story from one viewpoint, but *Fahrenheit's* is delivered through two investigations into initial protagonist Lucas' involvement in a ritual killing: his own (left) and the NYPD's (top)

Dynasty Warriors 5

A sequel by numbers, but that's exactly how the series has managed to maintain its strength: in numbers



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA FORCE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2005**

This, then, is where the series ends, at least for the platform upon which it began. Mooted as the final PS2 instalment, what does the franchise proffer for its parting shot? No surprises, that's for sure. Except, maybe, for the tigers – instead of taking a bodyguard into battle, you can now elect to be accompanied by a fierce cat with its own Musou attack.

Forgive the pun, but all those blows on the battlefield have pushed the fog back even further, and the game is now capable of introducing twice as many enemies to the fray, something that results in the player becoming impressively swamped in bodies. The draw-in haze has receded to the horizon, and the game's most common infantry fodder have had their energy bars reduced in order to allow players to hit the heady heights of a 1,000 or more KOs in no time at all ("Just over 3,000 is my personal best," says **Kenichi Matsumoto**, KOEI product manager, "although one of the programmers assures me that a total of 9,999 is theoretically possible").

Musou Rage medals are also available to pick up, and give the player an extra burst of speed and strength, not unlike a sped-up version of *Samurai Warriors'* standard Musou attacks. Other things have been lightly salted, too: 34 new stages feature, and every single one of the 48 playable officers on offer boasts their own storyline, as opposed to the house-specific narratives of *DW4*. It's slightly slicker, slightly prettier, slightly more frantic and just slightly more *Dynasty Warriors*, then.

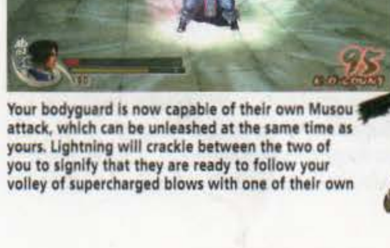




Each character has his/her own unique mid-air attack, activated with the triangle button. This allows players to whip away at a crowd of enemies before landing among the throng, or just lift up a more powerful opponent



Three interim saves are allowed per level, which can be used at any point during play



Your bodyguard is now capable of their own Musou attack, which can be unleashed at the same time as yours. Lightning will crackle between the two of you to signify that they are ready to follow your volley of supercharged blows with one of their own





Ibara's new hardware is put through its paces by the enormity of the animated explosions



Destroyed machinery releases clouds of glittering shrapnel, but mercifully it seems only the debris kicked out by a player's death can actually damage other vehicles





FORMAT: **ARCADE**
PUBLISHER: **AMI**
DEVELOPER: **CAVE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q2 2005**

Ibara

Gardens of roses and vast walls of bullets: it's Ground Force, Cave style

Though the bullets have barely dried on previous title *Mushihimesama*, Cave has already cocked the trigger on a new round with *Ibara* – continuing the shooter house's current run of artistic vibrancy thanks to new collaborator Kotani Tomoyuki. It's when the science of the developer's bullet patterns and scoring mechanics meet with the art of a sympathetic character designer that Cave produces its most memorable work – such as Junya Inoue's stints on *ESP Ra.De.* and *Guwange* – and Tomoyuki's designs for *Mushihimesama* and *Ibara* indicate another match made in heaven (or, perhaps, in bullet hell).

The steampunk industrial nation of Edelweiss is under threat from the Rose Garden, a cabal of svelte villainesses who intend to cleanse the world of humanity in order for beauty to flourish. The first stage of this beautification process is an overwhelming assault, drawing out the state's last line of defence: the Negotiators. Understandably, the negotiation skills required are of the shoot first and ask questions between levels brand, with the two player characters varying in speed and fire patterns rather than conversational technique.

Operating on a two-button shot and bomb system, firepower is upgraded through seven levels of intensity by collecting Shot Items. These power-ups pay diminishing returns as your level increases, but decisive negotiation can produce Big Shot Items to bridge the gaps between levels. Collecting Bomb Items ramps up the destructive power of your payload, with 40 Items producing a Super Bomb. Apocalyptic enough when left to its own explosive devices, a Super Bomb can also be used to fuel *Ibara*'s special attack, the Hado Gun, which creates a bullet-stopping wake in addition to its sweeping multi-pronged attack.

Finally, up to three satellite options can be collected, from a range of seven, to ensure every millimetre of screen space is seared by weapon fire. It's one of the more complex power-up arrangements in a Cave game to date, and should prove as pleasing to the trigger fingers as *Ibara*'s artwork is on the eye. No matter how many bullets the 2D shooter takes, its death continues to be greatly exaggerated.





Ibara marks a change in house style that Cave has planned for some time: to some it may not look strikingly different on paper, but in motion it's a new beast





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SPIKE**
DEVELOPER: **Y'SK**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q2 2005 (JAPAN)**

Kenka Bancho

Quiffs and fists fly in the nearest-to-the-brass-knuckles eastern GTA yet

Japanese game developers have been attempting to create a local take on the *GTA* phenomenon for several years, with the difficulties of scope further complicated by the issue of skirting the public's sensibilities. While Spike has been among the few not to play down the potential for violence with its *Way Of The Samurai* series, those games' feudal settings were seen as a method to make the bloodshed acceptable.

With *Kenka Bancho*, the publisher inches closer to contemporary Japan, portraying the youth gang culture of the 'Yankis' – but in a comical light, rather than the harder-edged amorality of the title that inspired it. Starting at the bottom of the Yanki heap, the player is for the most part free to make his own climb to the top, although at least 50 set-piece events will figure into his career.

Honour among Yankis takes the form of a civilised approach to duelling, in which the player and their rival must first stare each other down. When eye contact – represented by an electrical field, the Menchi Beam – is established, a slanging match starts, in which the player must chain arguments together until his opponent is humiliated. If it all seems a little *Monkey Island*, things take a turn for the gangland after this posturing session, when the winner throws the first punch (or swings the first baseball bat). However, as the player's reputation rises, so does his likelihood of cowing upstart Yankis with the staredown alone.

It may be a sweeping sanitisation of youth delinquency, but *Kenka Bancho* is alsc indication that more Japanese developers ar looking to revitalise their software market with their own take on western potential, rather than hoping to sell vicarious western games back to the west.





So long as gang warfare is initiated by the rules, it's not considered a 'bad' action. Even a dirty fight can be atoned for with a round of good deeds, such as transporting the elderly (right) – keeping a clean profile keeps the police at bay and avoids the threat of having your accessories confiscated





Customisation is key in *Kenka Bancho*, with the ability t accessorise from aviator shades and tracksuits to the ultimate in functional bling: a gold baseball bat (above)

Onmyo Taisenki

Camera input meets trading card game meets anime, as Bandai shakes out the big box of play gimmicks

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 31 (JAPAN)**

Despite heavyweight support in the form of *Sega Superstars* and *Saru EyeToy*, the EyeToy's Japanese reception has been considerably frostier than the one it enjoyed in Europe. Local developers continue to be intrigued by its concept, though, and *Onmyo Taisenki* represents another attempt to tap the little camera's potential.

With the EyeToy being angled increasingly towards the children's market in the east, Bandai's title draws on a popular animated series, already snapped up by the licence giant for a trading card line. Like Harmonix's recent *AntiGrav*, *Onmyo Taisenki* does not display the player on the screen – the first Japanese EyeToy title to take this approach – instead playing out as a cel-shaded action game, complete with branching story paths and the series' voice actors on dialogue.

EyeToy control features in the frequent battle scenes, in which the player must show one face of a two-sided colour card to command their characters: a green face for a standard attack, the violet face for a special attack. Once initiated, a move sequence is displayed on screen for the player to trace out, and sequences can apparently be linked together to form simple combos. In a canny example of cross-marketing, the next series of trading cards will feature barcodes compatible with the game that allow access to the special features described on each card.

A series of minigames, possibly more traditionally EyeToy oriented, and a twoplayer versus mode round out the title. If *Onmyo Taisenki* can break the Japanese EyeToy sales curse, it will be interesting to see whether it does so on the back of the series' popularity or the relegation of the camera to a slightly less self-conscious method of input.



Combat against stock enemies in the story mode is, with the exception of the input, fairly straightforward. Whether the twoplayer matches will play out like some sort of mime *Tekken* is a more interesting prospect







The main game mode follows the series' leads, a boy and his divine white tiger companion, but a free play mode will allow the player to take any of the game's attractively rendered characters into battle

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MC2**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E141**

Sniper Elite

Previous WWII games have given you hundreds of bullets to turn the tide of the war. Sniper Elite does it one careful round at a time



Your binoculars provide a slightly less tunneled view o your surroundings than the scope, so it's best to use th to spot targets before switching to your rifle for the k





The last time we saw Rebellion's urban sharpshooter it was at a stage where the overall atmosphere, even with the solidity of its accurately remodeled and bombed-out Berlin, was still difficult to ascertain. The latest version's haze of bleary sunlight and murky depth of field (equally solid on the PS2 version, with its muddier textures almost fitting the sepia desolation) do much to address that atmosphere and instil a fresh take on heart-in-mouth stealth. It's the periods of quiet that are the worst, drawing a panicked bead on every movement from a windblown leaf or scurrying rat, sprinting across too-open, too-exposed ground before settling back into viewing the city down the scope of a high-powered rifle.

Thirdperson close combat with pistol or appropriated machineguns is loud and inefficient compared to a single devastating long-range shot, but still brutally effective, suggesting that the protracted cat-and-mouse matches the developer envisions for online multiplayer could be ignored by players in favour of a WWII interpretation o *SOCOM*. But that's a matter to be shaped b how successful the singleplayer is in encouraging lone-wolf instead of gung-ho mentality. Considering the power a single proficient sniper wields in deathmatch games, it bodes well that every prospective *Sniper Elite* player will have worked their wa through a campaign dedicated to teaching the fine art.

It's already apparent in the splitscreen cooperative play, which quickly settles into a murderous symmetry of one player pinning down enemies for the other to pick off. Teamwork is a little over-rigidly enforced by players being unable to leave a certain radiu of their partner, but the duck-and-cover pacing is as taut as the singleplayer game, a is the uncertainty of threat. While squads of soldiers are predictable in their placement, they're not so predictable in their reactions being shot at, and in the time it takes to duck behind a window sill under fire and return your sights to the street they've often vanished into the ruins. Considerably more alarming is enemy snipers' capacity to ghost away from their randomly assigned vantage points when discovered, although it's the most sadistic of pleasures to pan your scope down a street and find one slowly crawling on all fours, unawares, into your crosshairs.

Promisingly, difficulty (and realism) can b modified on a global or individual factor scale, to provide anything from bolt-action railgun accuracy to an Olympic consideratio of distance and decay. Even at its most arcade-like, it's a considerably more broodin game than its WWII brethren, and all the more interesting for it: whether players can reconcile the need for patience with the instinct to run and gun still seems the game's major unanswered question.



The coop works well as you coordinate your areas of deadly effect: microphone communication during online play may be anachronistic, but it'll certainly be vital







A view through a kill

Sniper Elite's slightly queasy bullet-cam follows a killing shot from barrel to impact in what Rebellion terms an 'emotional reward'. It's a mixed emotion, with a curious blend of restraint (while the entry wound is grisly, there are no spouts of gore) and triumphal sadism (with shot distance and hit location reports that fall just shy of shouting 'NEW HIGH SCORE!').





Staying alive means spending much of your time crawling on your belly: not only does it minimise your profile, it stabilises your aim for sniping precision. Vehicles can be ignited with a shot to the fuel tank





RHODES TRIP

DAVID JAFFE HAS COME FROM TWISTED METAL TO AN ACTION GAME INSPIRED BY THE LIKES OF HEAVY METAL MAGAZINE. THIS IS GRECIAN MYTHOLOGY X

Eyes are gouged. Tendons are split. Men are eaten alive, families butchered by their own hand and cities put to the sword – it's enough to whip the tabloids into a new moral panic, if it wasn't for the source material predating them by a good few thousand years.

"*God Of War* deals with the greatest hits of Greek mythology, the elements most people know and love," explains Sony Santa Monica game director **David Jaffe** of his three-year labour of love. "The monster and set designs are clearly inspired by the classic stories, but so are the levels and missions – avoiding the song of the Sirens is an entire level, for example... with a bit of a twist."

It's those twists that indicate *GOW* has been developed with a more sympathetic appreciation of the classics – and of game design – than simply plundering their trove of creative cues. Apart from the task of assembling a mosaic from pieces that were never created to fit together, there's the issue of retaining the majesty and tragedy of an oral tradition in a literally breakneck action game, recounting a lone Spartan's blood-steeped odyssey to slay Ares himself.

"A great gameplay case could be made for a puzzle where you had to use reflections to avoid Medusa's gaze – but this would have given us a much slower game, and limited the number of times we could use the mechanic," agrees Jaffe. "So while we were adamant about keeping the concept, we had to fudge the classic story. In *GOW* there are many gorgons, not just the single character who appears in the myth, and you can look her in the eye – but only for a short amount of time, which keeps things tense without slowing the encounters down to a crawl."

If the *Twisted Metal* vehicle combat titles Jaffe designed (the first two titles on PS1 and the affectingly bleak PS2 *Twisted Metal: Black*) are a far cry from *God Of War*, they all share his hyperactive eye for relentless comic-book excess. After *GOW*, Jaffe is pegged to move on to a creative director role at Santa Monica: be very afraid



If avenging hero Kratos' ability to look a gorgon in the eye might have been the stuff of written legend, it's his ability to batter one to the ground and wrench off its head with his bare hands that assures him modern videogame immortality. Whether dealt with the blades chained to Kratos' forearms or his even more devastating grapples, the Spartan's attacks are astonishingly ferocious, producing conflicting desires to wince and look away or succumb to the bloodlust. Inevitably, the latter wins out, as was Jaffe's intention: "I wanted players to just cut loose, to get lost in pure rage, to get lost in raw, violent energy… to go nuts when they took control of Kratos. I am very proud of the violence in the game: it's creative, really nasty, very satisfying – it really speaks to the character and the vibe I wanted the game to give off. It's about much more than simply getting lots of blood on the screen."

A considered vicious streak is something western developers have demonstrated in titles from *Forbidden Forest* to *The Immortal* to *Manhunt*, but reactive control is another matter. Kratos may look capable of breaking even the least waiflike of Japanese action leads over his knee with scornful ease, but surely he'd have to stop them running rings around him first. *GOW*'s surprise, then, is that its brutality doesn't fill in for fluidity – movesets are immediately instinctual, and hugely adaptive. "I fully believe that – for the moment, at least – Japan makes the best thirdperson action games in the world. So we were always holding their games up as our goal, forcing ourselves to try and surpass the bar that companies like Konami and Capcom have set," says Jaffe. "Most combat games from America just don't *feel* very good. I'm not sure if it's a cultural thing, or a lack of game tuning time, but there are very few titles where it just feels good to swing your weapon around. Usually, it's very clunky and the animation is very choppy. The hardest part was finding animators and combat designers who really understood

"I WANTED PLAYERS TO JUST CUT LOOSE, TO GET LOST IN PURE RAGE, TO GET LOST IN RAW, VIOLENT ENERGY, TO GO NUTS WHEN THEY TOOK CONTROL"





TITLE **GOD OF WAR**
FORMAT **PS2**
PUBLISHER **SCEE**
DEVELOPER **SONY SANTA MONICA**
ORIGIN **US**
RELEASE **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN **E138**



Rather than being divided into separate levels, the epic locations segue directly into each other to suggest one vast environment

the feel I wanted *GOW* to have. We had a hell of a time getting the right animation team in, but once we did, the combat portion of the game took off."

Is it this awareness of other influences and willingness to learn from them, as opposed to the often insular Japanese approach, that lead to Jaffe proclaiming at the end of the recent one-level demo that his team is "doing [action-adventure] better than anyone else at the moment"? Jaffe groans. "That comment was *never* meant for the public to hear! I am so embarrassed about it. When I said that, it was meant to hype up the sales force, to get them behind the game, but it found its way on to the demo disc. A few nights ago I saw some forum poster – who had seen the video you are talking about – had written 'That Jaffe guy is an arrogant tool', and I was like, 'Yes, you are so right!' Man, what a stupid thing to say."

On the strength of the game's combat, though, we venture that it's not an entirely unforgivable outburst, and Jaffe is quick to qualify it in more contemplative fashion: "That said, I do think *GOW* merges action and adventure better than most games out there. While I feel Japan makes the best action games, the adventure portion of their titles is lacking – save for the amazing *Ico*. So I was very confident that we could 'take them' in our level design and puzzle design, as these aspects of the Japanese character games tend to be the weakest. Truth be told, most of our puzzle inspiration came from 16bit European games like *Another World* and *Flashback*. I don't think even current Japanese games have succeeded in integrating puzzles and storytelling as well as those older games did."

It's the adventure element that's the hardest to judge from what we've played of the game, shuffled through different puzzle and platforming sections with little feel for how the game connects them – like being read Homer by an impatient storyteller who constantly skips chapters. What seems underexplained or capricious may just be lacking context, demanding the full drive of the narrative to be appreciated, and there's certainly a convincingly epic nature to the production design. And Jaffe is likely to be his own most stringent critic: "I was getting sick of being promised a GRAND ADVENTURE on the back of every game box I picked up, only to be let down by a game that was either too puzzle-based or too combat-centric. Most games only have the time and budget to focus on fighting or puzzles or



DO I NOT BLEED?



Given his appreciation of how to portray violence in as aggressive and arterial a fashion as the situation demands, we asked Jaffe's opinion on the recent proliferation of bloodless warfare, from *Medal Of Honor* to *Mercenaries*. "Every game has different goals, and action doesn't need to be gory or realistic in order to succeed. So while I think a bloody, realistic-as-hell WWII game would be cool, I appreciate that EA was not going for that. And I really liked *Mercenaries*. I think it's cool that younger players, who are cut off from the gory games, can enjoy these titles – as long as I can still get my adult-themed games, what's wrong with a company going the mainstream route and trying to appeal to more people?"





Kratos' flaming chain-swords are spectacular to wield, but the prettiness isn't just cosmetic. In the thick of battle, the scarlet trails they leave are crucial for helping you to time combos and link moves. You're also aided by a near-imperceptible pause on the connection of a heavy strike, allowing a millisecond of planning for the follow-up move

platforming, whereas we were allowed the time and money for all three."

Expectations for the action game have taken successive evolutionary somersaults during *GOW*'s development time, and it's impressive that it neither shows signs of being immediately outmoded (its original release date would have seen it going head to head with *Devil May Cry 3*, a contest that in content, if not franchise cachet, it wouldn't necessarily have left with a bloodied nose) or of being subject to reactionary changes. Outside of platforming sections, environment interaction is left, for the most part, to violently interacting enemies' bodies against them: Kratos is no wall-running gymnast, but a relentless soldier. "We were really fortunate in that once we found our voice and core focus, we never wavered," says Jaffe of their temperance. "I think that's one of the keys to game design success: find the heart of your game and protect it like a junkyard dog."

Another notable aspect is the game's difficulty level, steering clear of forcing repeated attempts through punishing difficulty or an intentionally obtuse combo system. Most strikingly, large enemies and even some bosses can be fatally, and spectacularly, wounded by button-sequence finishers: combat's no less thrilling for it, and it's a delicious table-turn on the action game canon that only your enemies can clip half a life bar with one mortal swipe.

"We designed and tuned for what we call the 'hardcore mainstream' player – someone who loves games and plays them often, but isn't looking for a hardcore challenge," Jaffe explains. "It was our assumption that this particular audience values fun over being stuck on a challenge for hours on end... they favour spectacle and cool ideas, not stumbling blocks." That's no Sony mandate for accessibility, though: "To me, game design is about finding that sweet spot where the game is hard enough to engage, but not so hard you lose interest. Yes, it's different for every gamer, but it's pretty easy to know when you're tuning most of your audience out by making things too damn hard. That said, it seemed to work for Itagaki, as *Ninja Gaiden* clearly found an audience. Maybe it succeeded because the hardcore gamers have been ignored as games have gone more mainstream, and Itagaki saw a niche and rushed to fill it. I think the hardcore market is a valid market, it's just not one I'm interested in making games for. I don't design games to be mastered, I design games to be enjoyed."

"WE DESIGNED AND TUNED FOR THE 'HARDCORE MAINSTREAM' PLAYER – WHO LOVES GAMES, BUT ISN'T LOOKING FOR A HARDCORE CHALLENGE"







The colossal scale of the boss battles is handled well, maintaining the balance between skill-based combo juggling, spectacular acrobatics and indecently satisfying automated finishing moves. The latter could be argued to clip some of the challenge, but it's a welcome innovation in an almost entirely moribund area of game design



The game's genesis has been aptly Herculean: a concept grown through Jaffe's 12 years of service to SCEA (surely cleaning the Aegean stables is a pushover compared to a stint in internal QA). And there's been a fair share of madness and obsession, too, it seems: as development entered its final stretch, Jaffe recorded on his ever-frank weblog that he intended to move on from direct involvement in games after finally completing the project. "I think it was really a case of me biting off way more than I was comfortable chewing," he says of the experience, "but at the same time, I wasn't interested in eating a smaller meal. I wanted to make the epic adventure that I'd always dreamed of, and I would have been a fool to turn down the chance. But it came at a heavy price: I was never home to see my wife and kid, never had time for any of my other passions – if I hadn't been so busy, I would have realised I was quite depressed, but there wasn't even time for that! Don't get me wrong: I love games, I love *GOW*, and I'm looking to direct some other titles in the future... just none as big as this."

And if it was his final game – not that we're advocating that he casts himself from a clifftop in true period fashion, a fate Kratos surrenders himself to in the game's opening scene – what would he want it to be remembered for?

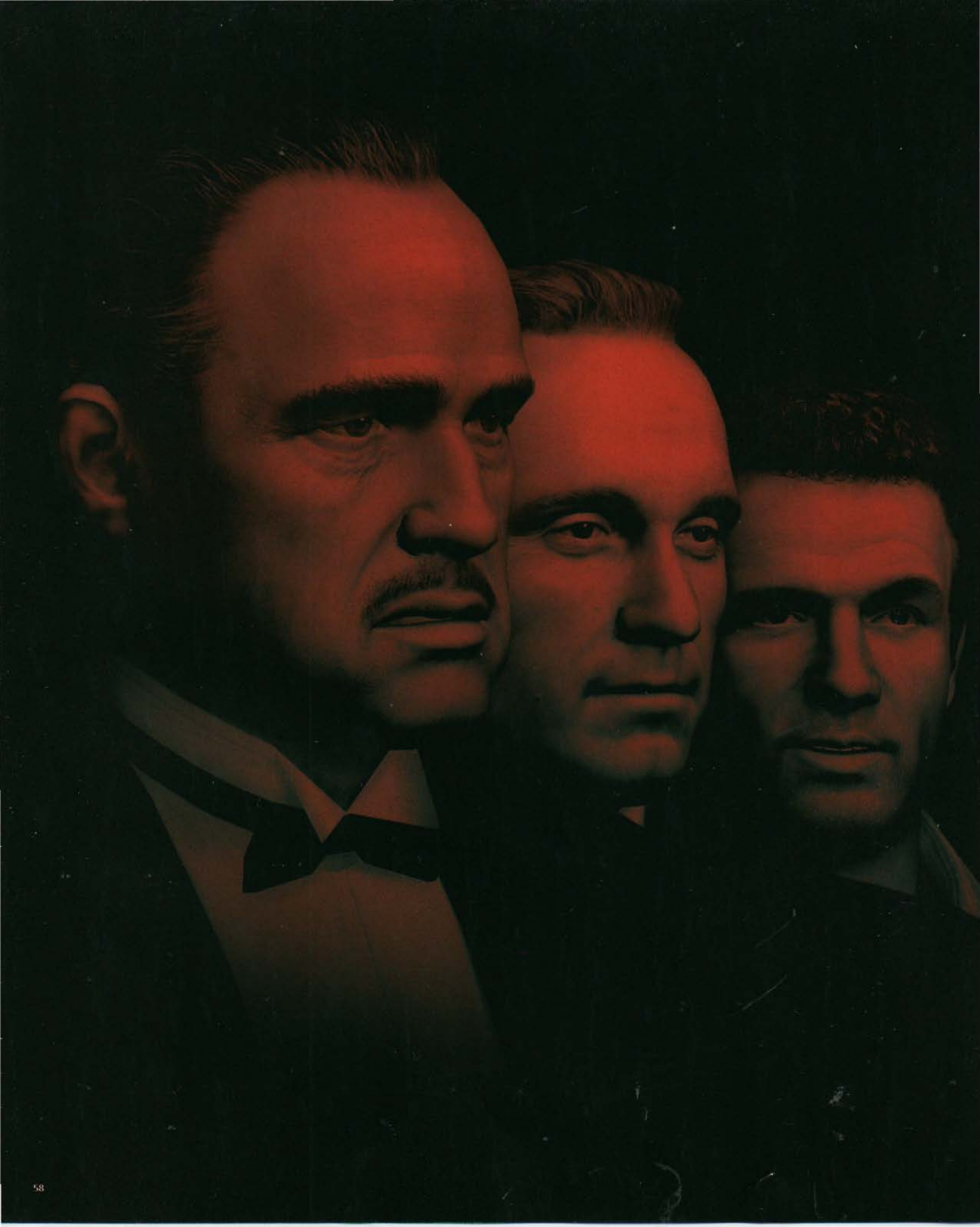
"I love this promise of games, the idea that they can send you into your very own fantasy – that's why I fell in love with them as a kid. So I would love if lots of people felt we had provided them a kick-ass fantasy to be a part of. That would make me very proud."



Being thrown straight into a boss battle would be very daunting in any other game. Here it's pure exhilaration







BLOOD PRESSURE

Complex and profound, The Godfather knows all about intimidation. Who better than EA, the company declares, to take on cinema's most daunting property?

Immoderate launch parties, relentless PR and furious corporate acquisition have certainly given Electronic Arts a reputation typical of a market leader. Check that: market dominator. Executive producer **David De Martini**, however, remains pragmatic about the likely response to his company's adoption of this particular asset. "It's not all the time that people will root for EA to be successful," he says carefully. The allusions of 'respect' that punctuate talk of the licence are genuine – they're no wry reference to Brando, nor are they lip service from a licensee to an illustrious licensor. Creative director **Philip Campbell** asserts that neither he nor the company are 'in awe', but concedes that *The Godfather* is among the biggest projects they've ever undertaken. And he designed *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*.

None of this is surprising – the demands of Mario Puzo's bestselling novel will crash in on EA's developers with vigour and from directions the industry has never seen before. Francis Ford Coppola's movie adaptation – the game's true creative inspiration – certainly won't adapt itself. It runs for three hours but features, as senior producer **Hunter Smith** observes, "only 15 minutes of action." This is without precedent, far from the likes of Scarface and other more conducive material. As a template for game development, it stands to reshape whichever genre it's applied to; its viability as a videogame licence, however, has yet to be proven at all. Brutality and revenge – that's easy; but how, in their first 'open world' game, will EA portray the intricate web of love, politics and respect that The Godfather only communicates in words? This isn't the 8bit era where any old property can be clamped onto a sequential arcadey template and panel-beaten into a rough fit.

De Martini has an interesting and probably essential solution: detach from the story and view it from an adjusted, game-friendly perspective. "What the movie implied," he suggests, "was that there was a tremendous action that was going on, just not portrayed by the characters Michael, Sonny, Vito or Tom. I think that was creative drive for us to insist that you were the star of the show." Campbell, a three-time writer of *Tomb Raider* expansion packs, is thus responsible for adding not only extra weight to the existing story, but a new player character and supporting cast through which that material can be conveyed. "Phil has done a masterful job of weaving our extended story, in conjunction with the guys at Viacom who helped us with it, around these new characters that you're gonna care about."

"WHAT THE MOVIE IMPLIED WAS THAT THERE WAS A TREMENDOUS ACTION THAT WAS GOING ON, NOT PORTRAYED BY THE CHARACTERS. THAT WAS CREATIVE DRIVE FOR US"





There's no denying that early renders suggest a game full of authenticity and character – at this juncture, sadly, there's little other material we can judge

So it's more than a dash of artistic licence that's bringing the proverbial mountain to Vito Corleone, and it's more than a mere exercise in convenience – it's insurance. By running parallel with the events of the trilogy's first episode (De Martini readily suggests this to be the first of "multiple games – four or five") the adaptation seeks to harmlessly cross paths with the established chronology without inflicting change. How better to approach a property that exists beneath the fiercely watchful eye of a literate Cosa Nostra of fans? "The last thing we'd want to do," he says, "is to soil the franchise by screwing up the first game." This is no understatement – a faux pas here may genuinely represent the worst-case scenario in the software giant's current market strategy.

TITLE
THE GODFATHER: THE GAME
FORMAT
PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX
PUBLISHER
EA
DEVELOPER
IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN
US
RELEASE DATE
Q4 2005

Captured for the crime, some of Hollywood's greatest talents journey beyond the camera and on to the gaming stage: Marlon Brando (Vito Corleone), Robert Duvall (Tom Hagen) and James Caan (Sonny Corleone) all star












***The Godfather* is** quite clearly a lynchpin in EA's desire to expand into what Campbell describes as "an ever wider range of IPs." It's a legitimate campaign – consider, if you will, how many cinema 'untouchables' may be accessible to a formula such as this. While the short-term implications of failure are the loss of this one potentially compelling franchise, the repercussions could shatter the foundation of a much wider agenda, not just for EA but for the industry as a whole. The rewards, conversely, stand to be equally momentous. "I think we'll be more confident as a company," Campbell confirms, "if we can approach gameplay and make this licence sing without the licence, as it were." In business terms, this translates into a colossal extension of EA's apparent licence to print money, even with the potential offset by memories of *Mafia* and *Gangland* that flood the cautious mind.

Despite concessions to action, EA's representatives are fanatical in their insistence that *The Godfather* will be a (virtual) world apart from the *GTA* crowd. "If I think about *GTA*," Smith recalls, "I think about the experience being 80 per cent in the vehicle, moving around, so you need a lot of space. We think of our game being about 80 per cent interacting with characters, both on the street and in interiors, and interiors behind interiors." There's no denying that, in its rhetoric, EA is well aware of the innovation it needs to accommodate the Corleones. Its attitude, as craftsman of an open-world environment, is refreshing in that its focus is centred on the licence, never on the competition. That said, when attention shifts to the game proper, aspects of the team's approach seem certain to raise an eyebrow.

Creative director **Mike Olsen** – the man who shepherded *PGA Tour* into the shadow of Tiger Woods – shares responsibility for the game's core mechanics. Olsen carries a surprising amount forward from his apparently disassociated resume, not least in the swinging action of your Godfather protagonist's fist. De Martini elaborates: "I pull my arm back, then I thrust it forward. In the real world, I make these two conscious decisions, but in a game you typically just press a button and there's no breaking out of it – in our game that won't happen." In conversation and, later, in demonstrated clips, this seems to be a curious system where the retract/throw action of a punch is literally split in two, the opportunity to break off the attack falling in between. Only during further discussion of the game's underlying principles does the logic behind this staccato art of fighting seep through.

"WE ASSUMED A LOT OF PEOPLE WILL COME TO IT WITH TWO GUNS BLAZING – BLAST EVERYTHING THAT MOVES. DO THAT, AND THE GAME WILL CRACK DOWN ON YOU"

The team is universal in its emphasis of one pivotal theme that underpins all: consequences. Strategy, negotiation, manipulation and consideration are the factors that EA hopes will legitimise the efforts. "The logo says it all," declares Olsen, "it's pulling the strings." Players, it's intended, will be re-educated from what the team see as a "James Cagney approach" that games such as *GTA* and *True Crime* have instilled. "We assumed a lot of people will come to it with two guns blazing – blast everything, shoot the newsboy, the females, everything that moves. Do that," warns Campbell, "and the game will crack down on you – it'll crack down on you in more realistic ways than you've seen in any of the other open world games." Premeditation, then, is the tenet behind every interaction, behind your character's rise through the family. With the right impetus – a time restriction, perhaps – the physical representation of internal conflict that's being hinted it is a scintillating prospect. Herein, though, lies the rub – the words, the talk and the evident respect have yet to be seen as a game-in-progress. For this, journalists and celebrities will later cram into the




Behind the closed doors of *The Godfather*'s many locations, the day's business is conducted via a simple language of fists and bullets. But, the team stresses, you can pull those punches if you have a change of heart

A family of developers pulling the strings (from left): David De Martini (executive producer), Philip Campbell (creative director), Hunter Smith (senior producer) and Mike Olsen (creative director)








Il Cortile restaurant in Little Italy, escaping a bitter NY winter to see *The Godfather* in action. James Caan and Robert Duvall pop in, pop out. As fleeting as their appearance is, however, more is seen of them than is seen of the game they're voicing.

The footage on display could be encapsulated in a couple of minutes, and New York minutes always seem the shortest. We can see the emerging face of the environment, decked with evocative decals; we see the faces of the Hollywood cast, impressively modelled if somewhat restrained in their animated expression. We do, in fact, see many faces – the face of Marlon Brando whose voice was captured prior to his death, the face of your character that, as Olsen reveals, can be custom-generated thanks, again, to his work on *Tiger Woods*. We see frightened civilians, fallen hobos and gangsters with cruel business in mind, but what this early code can't express is a direction behind the face and that, sadly, is what everyone wants to see. The fighting system is represented by a one-way, singularly offensive act of pugilism though the evident two-stage attacks remain interesting. We see bribery and intimidation engaged via a minimal A/B selector, but everything is frustratingly without context, rewarding our inquisitiveness with dead ends. It's all too basic, too early to honour or illustrate the team's evangelism.

Until E3, then, all we have is an agenda without form. We know – we appreciate – the ideal, but its infancy precludes even a vague measure of its potential success. For all the beguiling talk of 'vendetta points', 'police crimewatch points', the '70s sensibility and the puppetry of Mafia manoeuvring, it's impossible to draw conclusions until more substantial code plays out the formula.

"Is there a risk," offers De Martini, "that we won't be successful? Absolutely, because this stuff is really hard; but it certainly won't be for a lack of trying and a lack of effort. I think people respect the fact that this is really hard to do." He's right and, in the eyes and words of both himself and his colleagues, our respect is earned. It's hard, however, to avoid analogies with Don Vito himself. In his later years, the leadership and respectfulness only went half way; has EA really tapped the cunning and the insight that brought him his success?







Despite the emphasis on forethought and strategy, there are few times in the game when bullets can't fly. The game promises shootouts both from the passenger seat and on foot. As fancy as they look in renders, quite how they'll control remains unclear



TITLE: **WIPEOUT PURE**
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **STUDIO LIVERPOOL**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 24 (US), APRIL 7 (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

81266/0333

Livery/Logo Imprinting: 3140 silicon-bas

Warning : Operation of A-G craft and devices places abnormal levels of stress on nervous pulmonary systems, which can result in one or more of the following physiological symptoms: Pupil dilation, uncontrolled endorphin release, and sleep loss

wireframe silhouettes

Operation of A-G craft and devices

Future proof



For many, the original Wipeout defined the original PlayStation. But did this futuristic racer belong on a more futuristic console all along?

Wipeout is one of videogaming's most enduring lies, sitting alongside the 'failure' of the Nintendo 64 as one of the most relied-upon myths of the last generation. *Wipeout* was the game that wooed the casual gamer. Its club-culture cool and grown-up greys reassured 20-somethings that gaming wasn't for geeks, it was for people. *Wipeout* was the game that let Sony reinvent gaming's appeal – or destroy its soul, depending on who you talk to.

It's a myth grounded in reality, of course, as so many are. The absence of toybox tunes and primary-coloured cartoon creatures, not to mention its advertising leading Sony's charge into clubs, undoubtedly gave the PlayStation a substantial credibility lift. But the importance of *Wipeout* was never that it made gaming look grown-up, nor that it made it look cool. Its importance was that Sony had promised you the future and *Wipeout* was the game which delivered it. It was never a game designed to woo newcomers to gaming, not least because the unforgiving brutality of the control system alienated even dedicated players. And it was hardly a de-geeked face of gaming, steeped as it was in the detailed fantasy of the future of F1, from the reclaimed titanium on the racetracks to the leaked government documents in the manual. But everything about the way it looked and the way it sounded proclaimed that the future had arrived. Seeing *Tekken* for the first time was like watching evolution in action. Playing *Wipeout* was like stepping out of a time machine.

So, with the arrival of PSP, the history of the future is repeating. Sony, with another device which is all about moving things forward, looks to Liverpool for an illustration of its vision. Except this time, instead of a revolution, what we're getting is the fifth instalment in a fading franchise. Can it really turn the clock back?

The answer, albeit a preliminary one, is yes. Within seconds of the game starting to load, there's a clear sense

that the reason the series was fading was that it was waiting for the hardware to catch up. It's never been done better justice than on the PSP screen, a device that itself looks to have slid from some trackside holographic hoarding. So crisp is the imagery that you can watch from across the room, not just over someone's shoulder, and immediately place the *Wipeout* lines, the curves, that at once neutral and yet unmistakably European futurism. The uncomplicated textures that served it so well on the PS1 are reprised even crisper and starker on that immense small screen, haloed with warm sun glare or neon glow through the undulating circuits of *Pure*'s new locations.

It's too early to be sure of how effortlessly those eight tracks will become looped into your brain, or how well they'll adjust to *Pure*'s five speed classes (starting at the leisurely tour of Vector and accelerating dramatically towards the terminal velocity of Phantom). What's already

The uncomplicated textures that served it so well on the PS1 are reprised even crisper on this screen

clear is that at least some have the potential to be classics. *Wipeout*'s racing has never felt like anything else: that contradictory sense of being both airborne and yet connected to the ground has never been satisfactorily pulled off in another racer, future or otherwise. The swinging whoosh of the airbrakes, despite offering familiar back-end thrills, is utterly distinct from the tyre smoke of *OutRun* or the pirouettes of *Ridge Racers*. Combined with the subtleties of nose control and the sinuous curls of the series' trademark cambers, *Wipeout*'s racing lines are defiantly three-dimensional, as often bisected with right angles as swept with curves. It's a complex set of ingredients, but the best of *Pure*'s new tracks have them in carefully calibrated doses.



Ship design is as strong as ever, from the smooth curves of Zone mode's standard ships to the sleek lines of new crafts like the Harimau. Being shunted between the prongs of an Auricom (centre right) is a startling experience

Alongside the eight new tracks, *Pure* also returns to four familiar *Wipeout* courses, one from each of its earlier incarnations (Karbonis, Sagarmatha, Manor Top and Mandrashee), though all but the most analytical of racing minds will be hard pressed to recognise them from the outset. These are 'simulations', not rehashes, constructed from abstract slabs of pastel and digital heiroglyphics that challenge veterans to navigate by memory rather than landmarks. The conceit of artificiality is absolute: craft are rendered as blocky, segmented representations, weapons impact in a cascade of blocky pixels, and the start line isn't wreathed by cheers, but the chirruping of digital crickets. However, initial impressions are that these aren't quite as successful as the bespoke tracks, despite the suspicion that some corners and cambers have been tweaked to fit *Pure*'s handling.

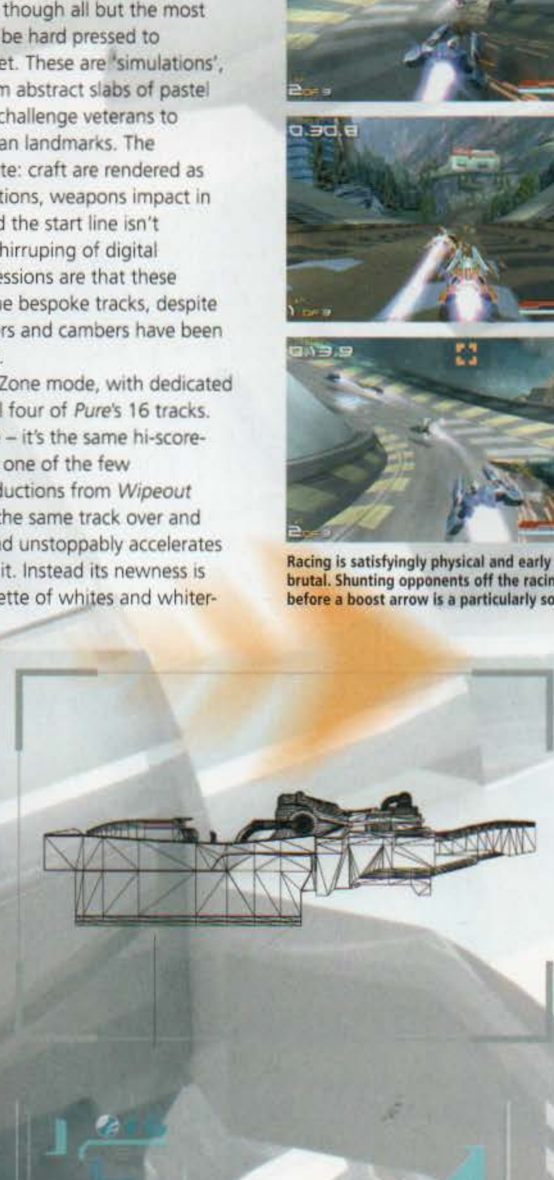
The other new addition is Zone mode, with dedicated Zone tracks providing the final four of *Pure*'s 16 tracks. Zone's not new in its structure – it's the same hi-score-happy survival mode that was one of the few enthusiastically received introductions from *Wipeout Fusion*, requiring you to loop the same track over and over as your craft gradually and unstoppably accelerates beyond your ability to control it. Instead its newness is purely aesthetic, a searing palette of whites and whiter-



Racing is satisfyingly physical and early laps can be brutal. Shunting opponents off the racing line just before a boost arrow is a particularly sound tactic



Although *Pure*'s new tracks couldn't be mistaken for anything other than *Wipeout* circuits – their 3D plan and elevation previews guarantee that – some may be a little disappointed by how rare viciously geometric hairpins, like the one above, appear to be





than-whites, utterly abstract, utterly astonishing. It's on seeing your first Zone track, on practically smelling the cooking ozone, that the conviction sets in that this is a game determined to forge its own vision of the future, not rely on one invented ten years ago.

As the speeds in races either real or computer-generated increase, control becomes a paramount issue. But *Pure* might just be the first game to justify the PSP's peculiar analog nub: its slightly alien feel may have been difficult to reconcile with the grip of *Ridge*'s wheels, but it's far more of a fit for an anti-gravity racer's turbulent relationship with the track. Airbrake control can either be assigned to the left and right triggers, or doubled up on the right trigger and steered with the stick – the latter mode proving useful for those who find the analogue slider more comfortable to use with one hand cradled flat around the PSP's body.

This delicacy of control is crucial, because *Pure* takes the balance back from fighting to racing. The caprice of the combat element remains – a clean first place can fall to a dirty disruption-bolt hit, with little recourse but to mutter a petition to whatever patron saint of AG racers you pray to (ours, naturally, has freckles and purple ponytails) and curl back into the race. But if *Pure*'s ordnance draws from *2097*'s extended loadout, not the *Mario Kart*-esque efficiency of the first game, there's a noticeable toning down of the aggressive combat element that began to overtake the series when it became possible to be shot down rather than slowed down. Jousting with the full pack on the first lap is still fraught with sizzling impact clouds and a string of coolly dispassionate cautions from your onboard computer, but beyond that point weapons are a means to a placing rather than an all-out assault on other competitors.

Crucial to this shift in balance is the decision to do away with pit-lane zones for recharging your ship's energy. Instead, any power-up can be absorbed rather than triggered, slowing your ship for an instant or two while it tops up your energy bar. It means that, certainly in the slower classes, there's no real possibility of losing

Warning : Operation of A-G craft and devices places abnormal levels of stress on nervous pulmonary systems, which can result in one or more of the following physiological symptoms: Pupil dilation, uncontrolled endorphin release, and sleep loss



Installing downloaded skins and tracks – like these **Edge** specials – is extremely straighforward. File sizes seem likely to be small – around 100K for a skin and under 2Mb for an entire circuit, complete with decals

›Fly by wireless

›From the first moment the *Pure* team sat down with the PSP's specs, the plan was always to exploit its wireless capabilities as fully as possible. As well as eightplayer ad-hoc wireless multiplayer, the game will offer downloads of new skins for the game's frontend, and there is also the possibility of new ships, circuits and music tracks being made available. Already planned is a facility which will enable players to design their own skins for the billboards which surround the track. This feature is already up and running – skins and billboards the team has designed in advance can be downloaded from the game's wireless site – as we did with the Edge billboards which can be seen in these shots. What isn't yet known is if there will be any charges associated with these downloads, although it seems certain that Sony will make them free initially to drive awareness of the PSP's wireless capabilities.

Primary thrust casing, hard plasmoulding serial #215-0678 Hardpoint exhaust fins AG-Systems Tech thrust output regulator

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The fury of watching an opponent boost past you is offset by the beauty of their curving trails. Multiplayer promises to be electrifying, but was unplayable from a single UMD

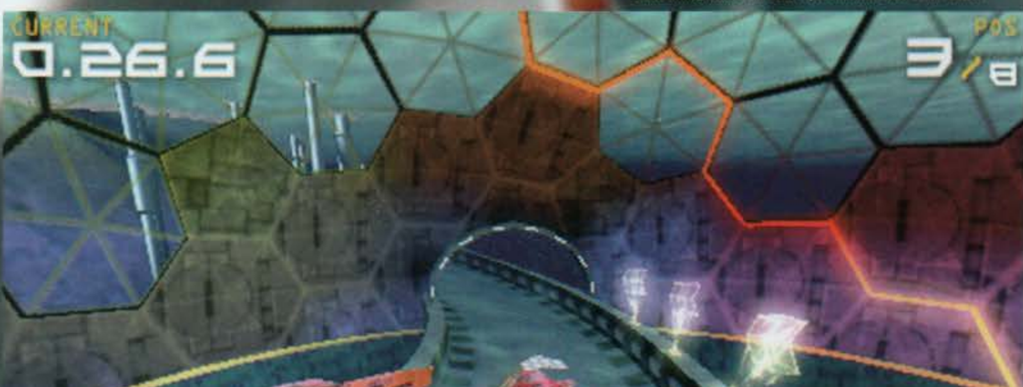




scale 64:1

Primary thrust casing, hard plasmoulding
serial #d15-0678
Hardpoint exhaust fins and enclosing vents.
AG-Systems Tech thrust output regulator
Adagen fluid management software v1.423
maintains a steady stream of Rapier-class GOX
particles through the thrust system, keeping
thrust levels stable whilst ensuring maximum

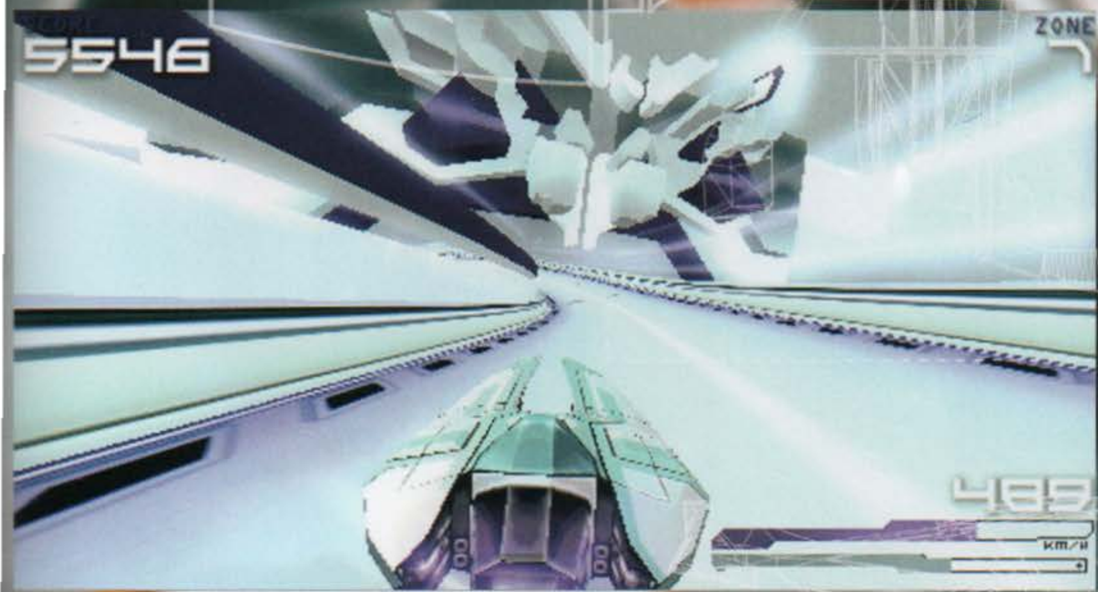
Pure's aesthetic manages to balance the restrained greys of the original and the blazing neon of *2097* into something which is both spectacular and believable



your ship even to those ill-judged turns that see you ploughing your nose through every last mine in a cluster. At higher speeds, the system can shift the emphasis even more dramatically on to your racing skills, as your arsenal is continually cannibalised to recover from crippling collisions.

Your rivals seem to share this paramount focus on the race rather than the fight, or at least to find a more sportsmanlike balance between the two. While they zero in on the racing line with typical efficiency in the first lap, they soon break with tradition in their eagerness to lock steering vanes with passing ships: fly one of the weightier models and you can return the sentiment, nudging a rival aside with the same flick of the airbrake that fishtails you through a chicane. Perhaps as reparation for *Wipeout Fusion*'s handling model, which left many veterans searching in vain for some 'Lock To Track: On/Off' toggle hidden in the menu, *Pure* returns the buoyant delicacy to anti-gravity racing – a well-placed rocket hit sending a ship into an inescapable back-end slide, a sharp turn threatening to capsize your vessel under its fake centre of gravity. It also adds another element of strategy to your choice of *Pure*'s eight racing craft. Other than the cosmetic appeal of each – which aren't to be sniffed at, as they finalise the transition from the first game's chiseled flying rockets into cauterisingly sleek, laser-guided ceramic missiles – the balance between speed, handling, shield and thrust produces a tangibly different racing experience. As things stand, it's an experience that initially offers only a moderate challenge, with the two slowest classes providing little more than a scenic drive to learn the tracks. The gulf to Flash class, the 'standard' AG league, comes as a shock to the system – the development team are currently taming this difficulty spike – and there's no question that Rapier and Phantom will satisfy the occasionally masochistic needs of loyal *Wipeout* veterans.

This complement of dazzling visuals and streamlined



play would be enough to elevate *Pure* to one of the most tantalising prospects on the PSP. It has more to recommend it, however. The series has historically received acclaim for its soundtracks rather than sound treatments, although few veterans are capable of forgetting the dispiriting metal thunk of a dead-stop collision from the first game, or the shriek of wingtip across side wall from *2097*. *Pure*, perhaps aware of the fact that you're going to be playing it through headphones, adds the detail and depth lacking in earlier games to its sound effects. It's worth experiencing a race with the music off to truly appreciate the rich thrum of passing ambient machine noise, the warning bleeps of mines Dopplering as they flick into your slipstream, the buzzing, bass-drizzled thump of a bomb impact.

Naturally, the soundtrack itself is pitched as perfectly as you would expect: among its 20 original tracks are offerings from the old flight school such as Photek, Paul Hartnoll and the frequently unsung, but franchise-shaping Cold Storage (itself birthed by *Wipeout*, and now returning the favour). However, players will be unable to select specific tracks from within races, only organise a playlist from the menu, and it's unlikely that it will be possible to access personal soundtracks which you may have stored on a Memory Stick. Both are elements Sony Liverpool would have liked to see included: both are victims of *Pure*'s early development timetable, produced before much was known about the PSP's battery life (which raised concerns about repeated UMD access during races) and before the software libraries were completed to allow access to user soundtracks.

It's not the only way in which *Pure*'s fit with the PSP is hampered by its execution. The team had always felt *Wipeout* would be suited to a portable, and sure enough much of it needs no alteration: the immediacy, the down-to-the-second thrill, the liberating weightlessness, the strobing succession of images and audio are all perfectly suited to the device. But beyond those intrinsic sensations, there are fewer appreciations of the portable environment than those displayed in *Ridge Racers* – it's impossible to save progress in a tournament or even suspend it other than by slipping the PSP into sleep mode, for instance, and the outlay of time required by a Zone session increases as your skill does (though Zone is perhaps best experienced in a controlled environment, such is the reacclimatisation period required after a heavy session).

There's an unexpected irony at work here: both Sony and Nintendo, in search for games which would communicate the abilities of their new handhelds, have looked back to the titles which defined their hardware a generation ago. *Mario 64 DS* succeeded despite itself – a bad idea sustained by some truly excellent material. *Wipeout Pure*, in contrast, is faced with the opposite challenge of the original. That game had the task of convincing the world a plain grey box could unleash a spectacular vision which looked, sounded and played every bit as vibrantly as any fantasy of the future you could imagine. *Pure* is faced with a machine whose looks and specs already promise all that and more. Its task, therefore, is to live up to the PSP's future-perfect image. To do that it needs to be a gamer's game, a technophile's heaven, and a designer's masterclass all seamlessly combined. Not until the code is finally stabilised will it be clear how close it comes, but for now there are strong indications that leaving it off your PSP shopping list would be a peculiarly pure form of folly.

Wipeout Pure needs to be a gamer's game, a technophile's heaven, and a designer's masterclass combined

› Forward looking

›It may be just as important today for *Wipeout* to look futuristic as it was ten years ago, but it's a much harsher challenge. Robots and neon used to be enough to signify sci-fi, but even ten years ago that was starting to date. Since then, stark minimalism has become first accepted shorthand for futurism and then hackneyed laziness. So how can you make your game look like the future when every avenue has already become old-fashioned? *Pure* doesn't have an answer to that question. It has three. Its main tracks take traditional futurism and temper them with nature, layering warm sunlight and water ripples on to stark urban landscapes. Zone mode (left) forces minimalism back into the future with an exuberant excess which ought to be a contradiction in terms. The Classic tracks (below) are just that, a nostalgic nod to old aesthetics, kicked into the next century with a searingly bold choice of colours. It may produce a game which doesn't have the focused cohesion of previous versions, but it guarantees its agressive modernity.

21/4445



Classic mode's makeover is distractingly eye-catching, and for those who aren't familiar with the tracks, learning them can be a challenge. There's little in the way of clear landmarks in this polygonal paradise



Photography: **Hiroki Izumi**



MADE IN NINTENDO

In Japan, Wario Ware outsells everything on the DS, even the might of Mario. We travel to Kyoto to meet the men who have poked, puffed and twisted Nintendo's traditions into something completely new

No matter how many times you visit, how many photos you look at, the icy restraint of Nintendo's Kyoto HQ still comes as a shock. Built of white light and razored right angles, there's no evidence at all of Nintendo's paintbox exuberance: even the vivid red of the logo is bleached to a space-age silver. Meeting the *Made In Wario* (renamed *Wario Ware Inc* for the rest of the world) team here is almost inconceivable. How could this sterile grandeur breed his dirty laugh and hot-dog dog-breath? How could it tolerate his hairy, beery belly and his couch potato habits? Surely there's been a mistake.

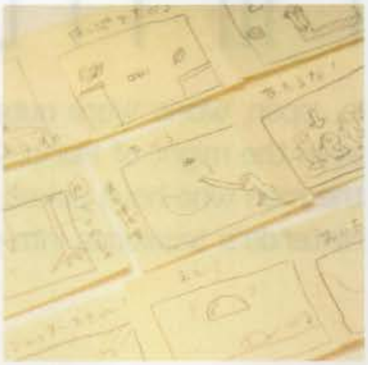


Each *Wario Ware* game starts life on a Post-it note, which perfectly encapsuates the entire idea. Each note is instantly recognisable, from the snoozing cat to the penguin parade. It's hard to imagine a game concept where the distance from drawing board to finished product could be any smaller











Spend five minutes with the team who created him, however, and tiny fizzes of his spirit start to appear. Swap business cards with one of the senior staff, and you'll notice that he's sweet-talked the company into inserting a '7777' into the usually staid formula of his email address. Give one to another and he'll pull his own out of a card holder fashioned as a perfect replica of a Game & Watch. ("Where can we buy one?" we ask at once. "Nowhere," shakes the head of **Yasuhiro Minagawa**, Nintendo's head of global PR, a little sadly. "You are awarded them for special achievements. Even I don't have one.") Let loose in the company's pristine foyer for a photo op, the team is full of laughter and pranks, using the giant eye of **E**147's cover to loom over each other and make monster noises. None of the suited salarymen waiting for appointments bats an eyelid.

This contrast – between Nintendo's corporate identity and the ebullience of its games – is entirely cosmetic. But there's another contrast, between the safe, measured world of Mario and the rule-breaking braggadocio of Wario, which is at the heart of why *Wario Ware Inc* might be the most important game Nintendo makes this generation. It spawned the *Wario Ware* series, taking a previously underused character to the GameCube for the *Atsumare!!* party game, to the GBA for the warped delights of the motion sensitive *Twisted!* (*Sawaru*), and to the DS for the Mario-besting brilliance of *Touched!* (*Mawaru*). But to understand it, you need to understand why he's the star of this unconventional series, and why he's evolved from the pantalooned buffoon of Mario's world to the Harley-riding hero of his own. Which came first? The idea to make a minigame game, or the desire to reinvent Wario? "Well," says **Yoshio Sakamoto** (producer of *Twisted!* and *Touched!!*), "either way is correct, because the two ideas – making a gathering of minigames, and using Wario the character – occurred almost simultaneously. When we were thinking about the idea of minigames we thought that maybe not so many people would really comprehend that this was really a 'real' videogame, that some people might even be upset by it, by how silly it seemed. I thought we could get around that by making Wario the main character, so: 'Look, these minigames might look silly, but please forgive Wario, because he's made them and that's what he's like'. So the ideas depended on each other – they were almost simultaneous."

You need to understand why he's the star of this series, why he's evolved from the pantalooned buffoon of Mario's world to the Harley-riding hero

Dig deeper, however, and it's clear that *Wario Ware* was a crazy idea in search of a savvy mentor. The original impetus came from the 64DD art tool *Mario Artist: Polygon Studio*, which featured a minigame suite called *Sound Bomber*. "Those seven games are actually the seven initial stages of the original *Wario Ware*," explains **Goro Abe** (main director of *Atsumare!!* and *Twisted!* and director of *Touched!*) "They were very simple, and all that happened was that as you got further the game got faster." *Polygon Studio* failed to make much of an impact in Japan, and it wasn't until the director of *Sound Bomber*, Kouichi Kawamoto, was transferred into Sakamoto and Abe's department that he found open minds in which to plant his idea of a game made of hundreds of other games. So the team had a concept, and a character to excuse its oddities. But why not just use Wario as he was?

Character designer **Ko Takeuchi**, who created all of *Wario Ware*'s characters, explains: "There is already an authentic franchise, the *Wario Land* action games, and we were never attempting to change that image. We really wanted to establish a new Wario franchise – up until then Wario only really appeared in Mario games, he was part of the Mario family. So we thought, why not make Wario the standalone character, and even further expand into the Wario family? When it comes to the Wario character and the other characters they are all new creations, so there has got to be a personal touch to the original design of

these characters." And now that Wario has a new identity, does he think that this new franchise will grow the way the Mario franchise has, and move into different games? "I hope so," he says, before Sakamoto takes over to clarify. "We are not trying to pick one character and say: 'Let's make a game for him or her'," he declares. "But we're always thinking about new ways of entertaining people, and if one of our ideas matches the style of a particular character, then that's how it would happen."

So, the team was equipped with a new character and a new theory of gameplay. But where do you start? "Well," says Abe, "here." And from the back of the room he fetches a pasteboard, gridded with tiny, oblong Post-it notes. This is the original *Wario Ware* – not a storyboard or a work-in-progress, but the whole essence of the game, perfectly preserved in squares of pale lemon. Each minigame is represented in its entirety: the start, the finish, the command, the interface. Each idea is so tiny and so clearly defined that it fits into a single square inch. This is how each team member presented their minigames to the director: the good ones earned a place on the top row of the board, the weaker ones clung on to the bottom until better ones squeezed them off. How many never made it? "For *Twisted!*," says Abe, "we had about a thousand ideas. But only about 200 went into the main game." A thousand Post-its and a thousand minigames. If Mario and Peach ever do make it down the aisle, these are the people who will provide the confetti.

How do you choose? How do you know what will make a good minigame? "It's easy to say that *Wario Ware* is about breaking all the rules of game design," counters Abe, "but it's not about destroying all the existing rules at all. It's about going back to the basics of the rules which used to apply to all videogames. It may be a small, silly-looking game, but these are the fundamental rules of all games. For each minigame we spent all our energy making it the best expression of every fundamental rule."

But although these Post-it notes contain *Wario Ware*'s essence, they don't



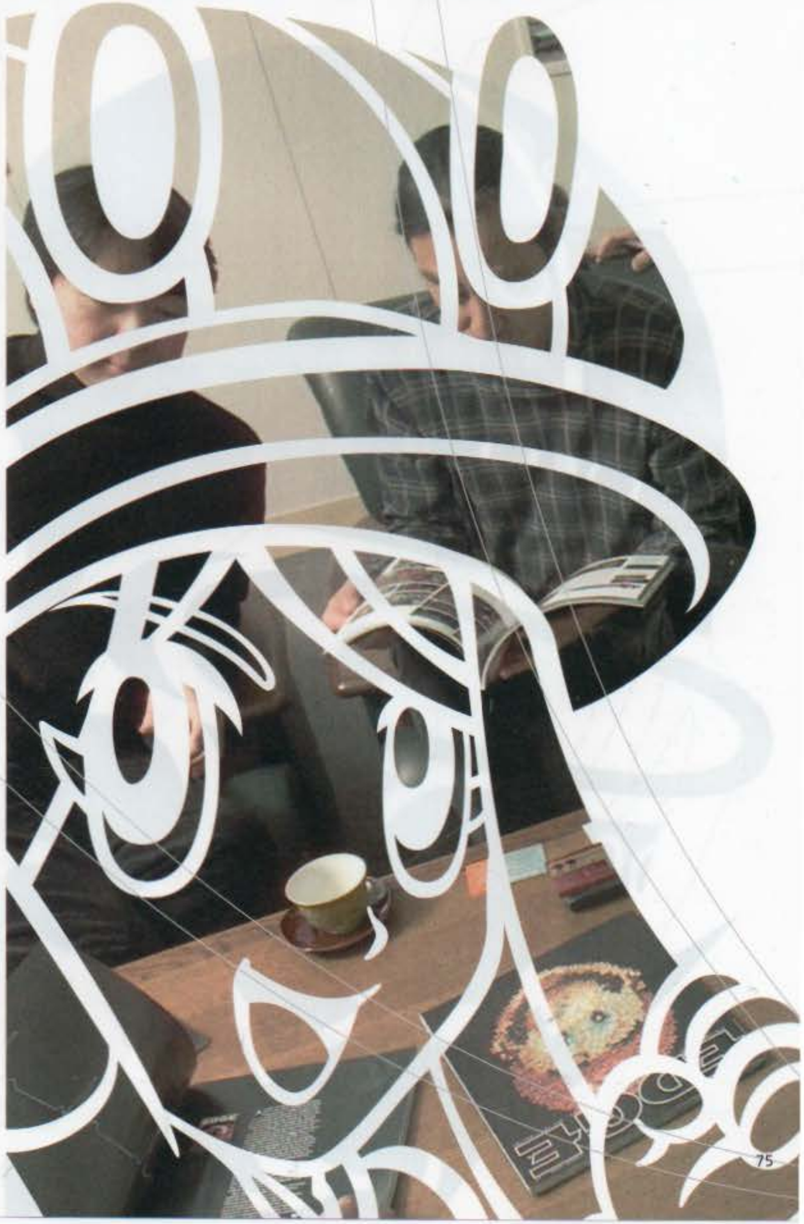






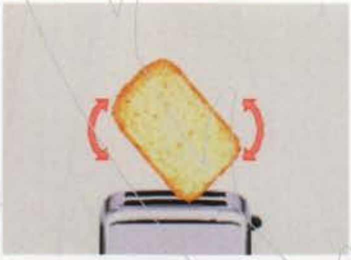


Five key faces from the four *Wario Ware* games. Naoko Mori (top left), from Intelligent Systems, is the series' art director and graphic designer. Goro Abe (top right), worked as director on *Atsumare!!*, *Touched!* and *Twisted!*. Ko Takeuchi (above left) designed the initial characters for the original GBA game, and has worked on every title since. Nintendo veteran Yoshio Sakamoto (above right) is manager of the software development department home to the series. Ryuchi Nakada (right), main director of *Touched!*, worked as a map designer on *Metroid Fusion* and *Zero Mission* before the whole team was swapped over to the *Wario Ware* project









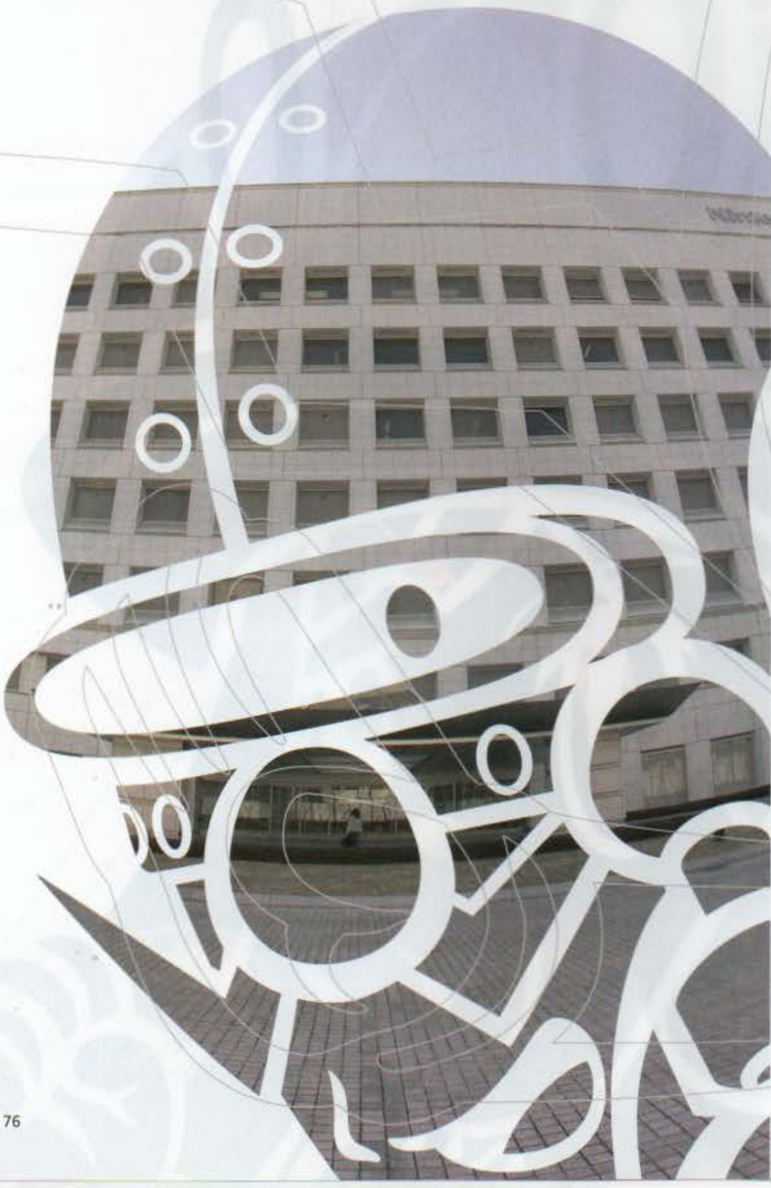




Although each of the four *Wario* games is essentially a retread of the same idea, each intelligently ex ploits the potential of its ho platform and adds a layer of self-referential humour to the series



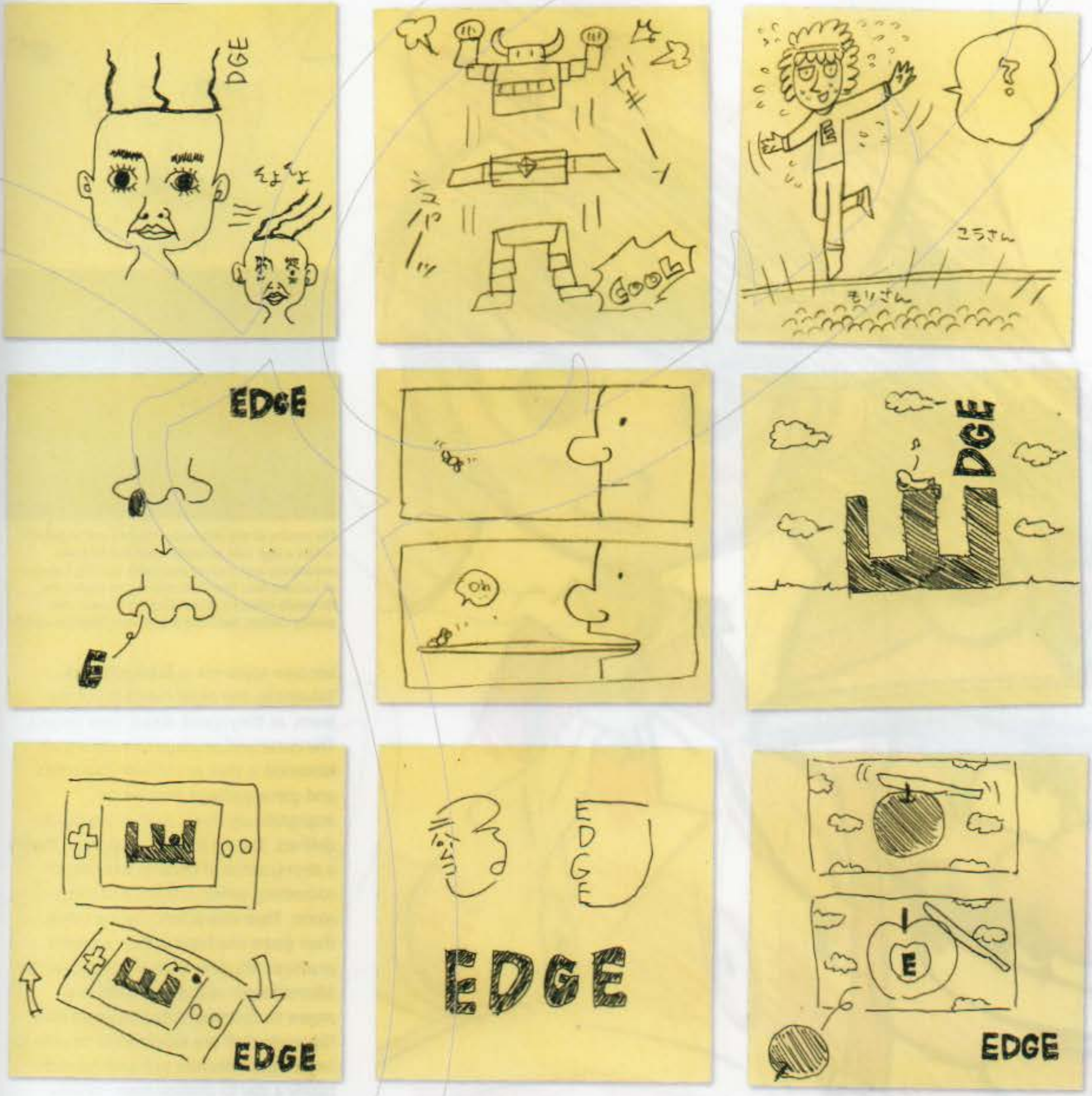




contain its style. How do you go about pulling a thousand ideas together? "We have a completely different atmosphere from other game developments," asserts Sakamoto. "For other games, the atmosphere is: 'OK, let's make something together'. So there are lots of different designers and artists working on a project, but they have to talk to each other, they have to come up with some kind of consensus so there won't be too many discrepancies between the background art and the character art, for example. It's completely different on *Wario Ware*. For us, each artist and each designer became an independent director for each minigame, and their mission was to be unique and different from each other. In other projects, that kind of attitude cannot make a good game, but *Wario Ware* is unique because these kinds of people, going in totally different directions, can make one whole game." He pauses to consider: "But I think maybe from the outside people thought that it was odd and a bit... weird."

Once the skeleton was decided, it had to be dressed. Takeuchi explains how the policy of diversity was followed through: "Each individual artist came up with their own individual and unique version of the artwork, and each person had to come up with their own style. That's one of the policies we came up with: even though one person may have made several different games, we wanted every single game to have its own style and identity." But with the team working on the games, and Takeuchi working on the characters, someone was needed to work on the overall presentation. **Naoko Mori**, one of the 15-strong team of Intelligent Systems staff who collaborated on the *Wario War* series, was appointed as art director. Did she have particular skills or expertise which made Nintendo want to bring her in? "Well, to tell the truth, I have never worked before as art director," she confesses. "I really don't think my ability qualifies me to be an art director, but the need from Nintendo was for someone who had expertise in being silly and stupid, and at Intelligent Systems when we need something stupid and silly everyone says: 'Oh, you need Ms Mori'." She's keen to downplay her ability, but the art direction of *Wario Ware* is a uniquely challenging and delicate role – it has to contain the startling diversity of th minigames without cramping them or overpowering them, and the design of each stage is as consistently charming as it is unpredictably unusual.

Mori's presence is also significant for the make-up of the team. It seems that the people behind Wario are unusually varied – young, old, experienced and novice. Is that right? "Yes," says Sakamoto. "Yes, it is." And is that variety what allows the game to be so fresh? "Well," he says, "in that you are not entirely right. The fact of the matter is that everybody, be they veterans or newcomers, was trying to express themselves in a free manner. After all, we could come up with the craziest ideas and then blame it all on Wario and say: 'Yeah, that's the kind of thing he would do'. So that's the atmosphere we had created,



A request for a *Wario Ware*-based sketch for our inside covers led to this series of improvised takes on familiar ideas. The speed of their creation gave a clear indication of how fast work was on the originals. *Polygon Studio* (below), a modelling tool for the 64DD, contains, almost in their finished state, protoypes of the first seven *Wario Ware* minigames



and we gave the utmost autonomy to all the developers, young and old. But maybe I should point out," he adds, with a stern twinkle, "as the representative of the older developers, that the veterans themselves always want to express themselves in new ways, and I am very glad that we were given that opportunity. And, if there was nobody to oversee the project and sew things up, then the game would not have worked, so in that sense the presence of the veteran developers was essential, because we have the knowhow for making full games."

This working pattern, of a few dozen people pulling harmoniously in opposite directions, has been repeated across four projects in little more than two years. After the completion of *Wario Ware Inc*, some of the team left, moving on to other projects. The remainder set to work on *Twisted!*, while Sakamoto and Abe's team finished up the GameCube port of the original. They segued straight into work on *Touched!*, but by this stage they were under-staffed and over-deadline. "Everyone else was working on *Twisted!*," explains Abe, "so we didn't have enough staff members to work on the DS game. At that stage, we thought the game would be delayed, that we wouldn't be able to finish it in time for the Japanese launch. But we became aware of strong voices inside the company saying it would be a very good thing if we could get it ready for launch, so we had to squeeze our heads and find a way to get it ready in time. And, fortunately, in June the *Metroid* team completed its own project, so we could borrow those people as soon as they finished. And then as soon as the GBA version was finished that team joined us too, but we had to do it whatever happened. So we did it."

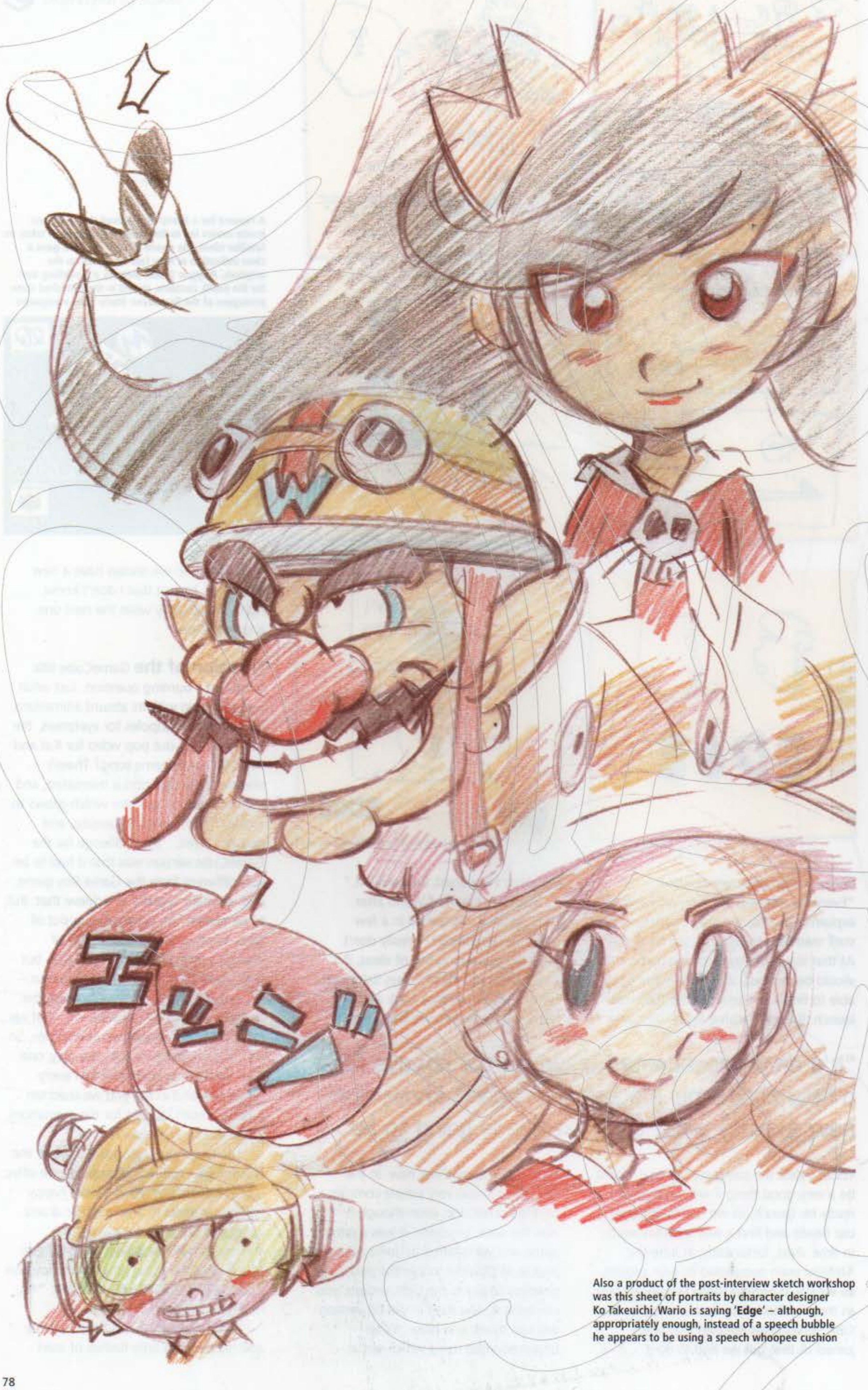
Are they bored of Wario after thousands of minigames in a few handfuls of months? "I really don't think we're running out of ideas, if that's what you mean," says Sakamoto, firmly. "When we look back at the history of the series, we were always challenging something new. In the first game it was very simple controls; on the GameCube, even though it was the same concepts, it was a party game and we wanted to invite as many people as possible to join the party; and needless to say in the GBA version, you can twist it, and then in the DS version you can touch and blow. It's an unprecedented trend which we've established, so we always have a new challenge. It's just that I don't know, right now, exactly what the next one is going to be."

> "It's an unprecedented trend, so we always have a new challenge. It's just that I don't know, right now, exactly what the next one is going to be"

Mention of the GameCube title brings up a burning question. Just what was going on with its absurd animations, the man with tadpoles for eyebrows, the cardboard cut-out pop video for Kat and Ana's karaoke theme song? There's silence as the question is translated, and then a trickle of laughter which grows to a gale. "Yeah," says Sakamoto, and pauses. "Well… the challenge for the GameCube version was that it had to be very different from the Game Boy game, and we really wanted to achieve that. But, to be honest, we were running out of time. We had this large amount of storage space available on the disk, but nothing to fill it, so it was very serious – we needed to discuss how to finish the game on time, and one idea was that we could fill it with video and animations. So we made ourselves a rule: one day, one film. We had to make one film every single day, and in the end we used ten times as much storage for the animations as we did for the game!"

The laughter is infectious. One of the reasons your game is so popular, we offer, is that players can tell you were happy when you made it. The laughter drains away and the team look like this statement is the stupidest thing they've ever heard. We make amends: happy, but tired. Sakamoto breaks into a grin: "Ah, now you've got it. Yes, that's it."

The conversation has been amiable and relaxed, but little flashes of steel



Also a product of the post-interview sketch workshop was this sheet of portraits by character designer Ko Takeuichi. Wario is saying 'Edge' – although, appropriately enough, instead of a speech bubble he appears to be using a speech whoopee cushion





The results of the *Atsumare!!* team's self-imposed 'a film a day' rule included crude but hilarious animations and a spoof pop video starring cutouts of Kat and Ana. The films entirely contradict the Nintendo ethos by prioritising enthusiasm over quality control, but have a freshness little can match

become apparent in Takeuichi and Sakamoto, the older members of the team, as they speak about their project. The curse and privilege of working at Nintendo is that you inherit characters and game patterns that are as inspirationally iconic as they are rigidly defined. Talking to these two men, there's a strong sense of pride in working on something which is theirs and theirs alone. Their characters, their art style, their game mechanics, their working practices. It's clear from the way that the *Metroid* team was parachuted in en masse to *Touched!*'s development that Nintendo staff are expected to be able to swap from franchise to franchise with barely a day to change track. Wholly original games are becoming rarer, and a career at Nintendo runs the risk of treading forever in the footsteps of giants who have since moved on to other things. Perhaps some of the urgency of *Wario Ware*'s schizophrenic inventiveness comes from their determination to mark out some territory of their own, to add to that heritage rather than serve it.

So how does it feel to have made the game where Wario beats Mario once and for all in the arena where it counts the most: the charts? The team's response is subdued. "It's very flattering," says Sakamoto, carefully.

Did you ever think it would be this successful? Abe explains their intentions: "We really intended it for the people who used to play but haven't played games for a long time. In the first game people did need to understand the basic grammar of games – that you press A to jump and you move using the D-pad, so I think it was perfect for people who used to love games and then quit. But as soon as they start playing their old memories should be





Nintendo's Kyoto HQ is still relatively new, and the foyer has a relentlessly precise geometry. Penetrate the corridors, however, and you're more likely to find groups of employees kitted out with DSes, *Band Brothers* and a Marshall amp turned up to 11

conjured up. And now we have *Touched!* and *Twisted!*, and those have completely new interfaces, so those games are suited to people who don't even know those basics. They make everybody start at the same line, there's no such thing as veteran or beginner."

For his part, Sakamoto believes *Wario Ware*'s appeal hinges on its timing: "I think we launched *Wario Ware* at what was probably the best time. Five years ago, I think most people were enjoying games with gorgeous looks and complex gameplay, and they just wanted to play even more gorgeous looking and sophisticated games. If we'd introduced Wario then, some people would have liked it, but it would have been defeated by more mainstream games. But now the majority of the audience is kind of fed up with the size of games, and getting tired of the elaborate graphics and sound and so forth, so when they see Wario they say, 'Oh, this is exactly the kind of thing I was missing. This is the kind of thing I was looking for'."

It's an explanation that is very much in sync with Satoru Iwata's passionate belief that there's a whole new market of gamers who have been alienated by the excesses of the current generation of software. Does Sakamoto think he's proved that theory right, that *Wario Ware* should change the way that games are made? "If I try to have an objective viewpoint, then probably it's that the industry and the whole market required the launch of a *Wario Ware*-type game – many developers were trying to cater to these needs, and we were the ones who came up with a way to do it. And now I think many people are looking forward to all the weird things that Wario will be able to provide them with. The high sales figures are important because they give us good information. They should encourage us that we should all be working more and more to expand the horizons of gaming. Now we have to think: there *is* this need. So what shall we do next?'"

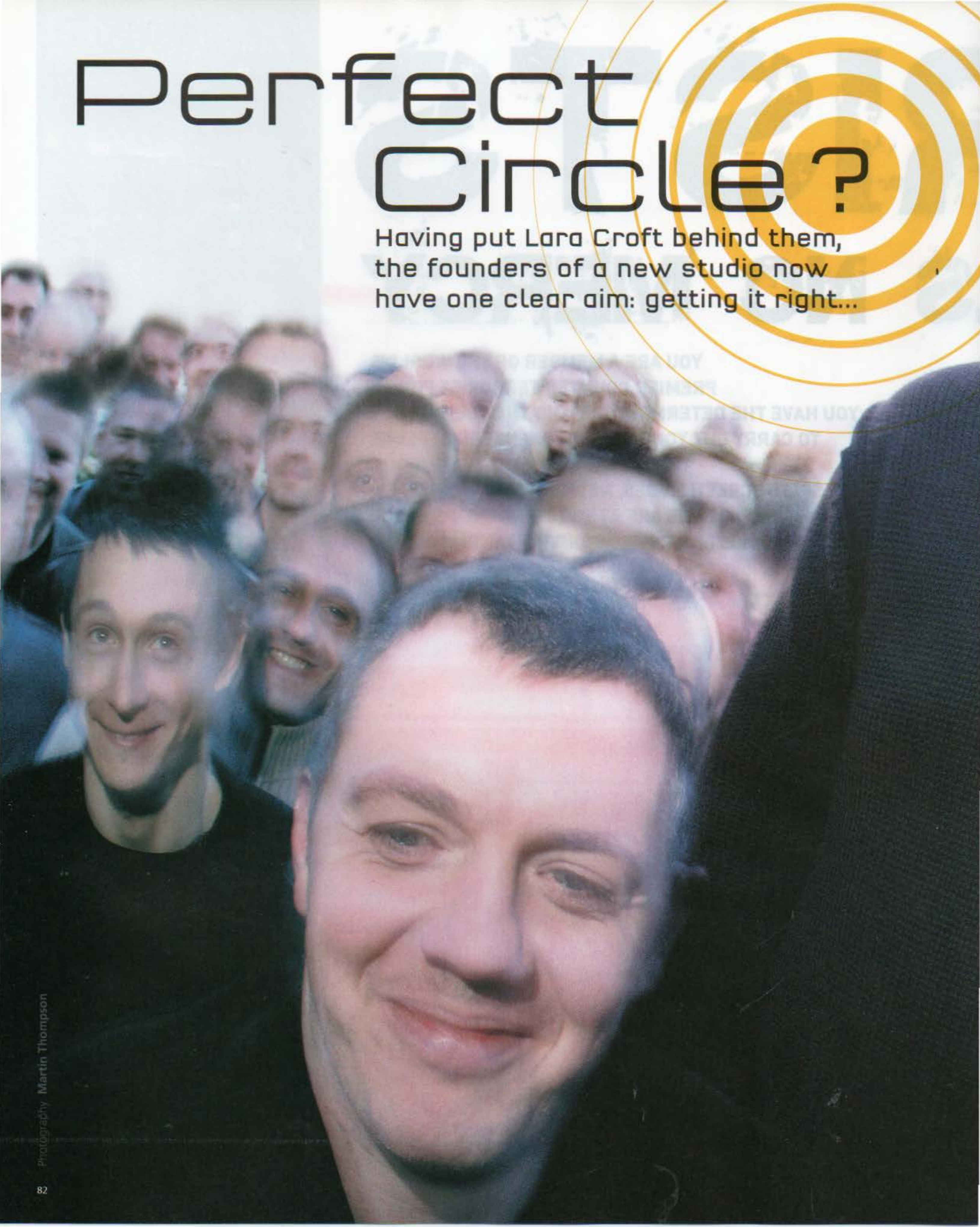
When talking about the story of the original *Wario Ware* game, which sees Wario gathering an assortment of contrasting characters to reinvent videogaming and turn a quick buck in the process, Sakamoto is unabashed in admitting that the story in the game is the story of the game. "That's what it was like," he says. And that story, under Iwata, is Nintendo's vision of the future. New ideas, accessible games, quick development. Even with *Wario Ware*'s dramatic success in Japan, and its growing fanbase in the west, there's still not enough evidence to be sure that it's a vision that's viable. But if it is, it's Abe who will write its motto: "On the first game, I said to the director: 'Let's just make as many games as possible. But nothing that's excessively crazy – we'll stick to acceptably crazy'." And with Wario as the acceptably crazy face of the new Nintendo, would you want to bet against them?

"I said to the director: 'Let's just make as many games as possible. But nothing that's excessively crazy – we'll stick to acceptably crazy'"



Perfect Circle?

Having put Lara Croft behind them, the founders of a new studio now have one clear aim: getting it right...



Photography Martin Thompson



Sandwiches. They can't tell you much about an ambitious UK videogame startup. **Adrian Smith** – cofounder of Circle Studio – could, but right now he's "having the shit pounded out of" his back by his chiropractor – a precautionary step before an impulsive trip to Everest. Jeremy – the brother with whom he started the company in 2003 – is also missing, as he'll remain for the two weeks he has left in Barbados. So, then, sandwiches are all we have. And cheese. And salad. And curried shish kebobs, garlic pastries – hang on, this buffet lunch is huge. Perhaps, amid the situation we're talking about, it does tell us something, after all: the bills are still being paid, and then some.

As a Porsche Cayenne pulls up outside, the uniqueness of the environment sinks in. This is the headline-grabbing house that Lara built. It's the same Derby office the company had a year ago, within throwing distance of Core Design and now at a full capacity of 50 staff. Until publishing rights to its flagship title, *Without Warning*, were recently acquired (by Capcom, of all companies), the studio reported to no one beyond the brothers themselves. Past the front door, the company's expressive logo hangs from the wall, split into four painted quadrants; as we arrive, we note that one of them is back to front, which, when a circle is involved, results in something you'd expect to see in *Pipemania*. Hopefully it's no omen.

"I'm really pleased to say that everything we've done has paid dividends," Smith is quick to reveal. "There are smiles on faces and there's a very different atmosphere and environment." There's undoubtedly a spring in the man's step, more than you'd expect from a cracked back, and almost defiant to the fact that seven years' paydirt is gradually being burned by his fledgling company. "We've nowhere near recouped our investment with the initial signing of *Without Warning*," he explains. Yet even during the gruelling production of *Tomb Raider: Angel Of Darkness* (which he freely admits "wrecked marriages" and "sucked the life from a lot of people"), the two brothers





In that most Hollywood of ways, *Without Warning* offers you control of civilians as well as military personnel. Often unarmed, their purpose is one of enjoyable diversion rather than offering a complex gaming mechanic

were relentlessly optimistic. For his part, Smith does nothing to suggest that the air of invulnerability has waned; these are people who, if a train's coming and they're standing on the line, will bare their backsides and save the wreckage for later. Lara has afforded them that.

Starting afresh, though – taking things full circle, as it were – requires something more than confidence and deep pockets, and that's pluck. In an industry where even the creator of your own middleware has been absorbed by an overseas giant, it takes guts to go it alone. "I think what we did was brave," asserts Smith, "in that it would have been easy to retire and go sit on a beach, drinking coconuts for the rest of our lives." He asks when someone last attempted to start a studio from scratch and, no, it certainly wasn't recently. "If you start a company with six or seven guys, £150,000 would take you nowhere. It may take you to seeing some publishers, but we've found that they have a whole range of procedures that can take up to five or six months."

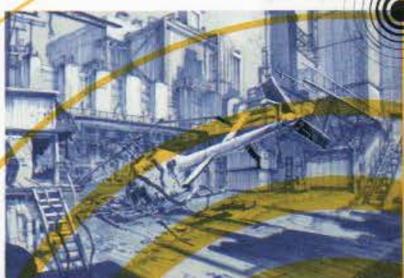
For someone commonly perceived as the creative brain of the family (Jeremy having sat on the Eidos corporate board for three years before the Core bubble burst), Adrian Smith isn't short of business experience. In his own capacity at Eidos, he evaluated and finalised products while negotiating competitive strategy; this was during the *Tomb Raider* era – his CV is sound. So when he expresses his frustration at the state of the industry today, you're forgiven for feeling his pain. "There's great talent out there," he laments, "and they have nowhere to go. We spoke, quite early on, to a lot of small companies who had great products and massive enthusiasm but just couldn't get it through the doors. Maybe, if we'd funded it differently from the start, it'd have been great to take on four or five of those and throw them a lifeline of ten grand a month… You'd struggle to name a dozen large independent studios. It boils, fundamentally, down to the cost – it's like shredding money."

There's more than an air of philanthropy in the room. For a studio that's 15 months old and a year into its first game, the absence of tooth-and-nail self-preservation speaks volumes. The clock may have reset but the wrinkles (and scars) of the past remain. Faced with a second shot at life, then, it's no surprise that the Smith brothers and their Core faithful threw a single agenda across the freshly unpacked boardroom table: 'Let's get it right'.

Circle's project manager and producer, **Andrew Thompson**, remembers those early discussions that, at once, shaped the company: "We had the opportunity that we'd started off with a blank sheet of paper. I was well documented that we didn't get it quite right with the last *Tomb Raider* and there were a number of internal reasons for that. When you try and analyse what went wrong and try and learn from your mistakes, it's quite difficult to do that with the same group of people when they're all at different points, between products." It's well documented how the brothers' departure from Core took 35 of its 37 staff away with it, all of whom then formed the bedrock of Circle. What better time, continues Smith, to



Circle is currently putting the finishing touches to the game's more advanced visuals. Remaining largely unaffected by external lighting (it takes place overnight), the game will need to fully exploit its interiors to ensure variety and depth



Thanks to the game's interwoven narratives, key events such as this helicopter crash will likely occur several times, viewable from different perspectives as you take on the guise of the three hapless civilian characters

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

***Without Warning* takes place entirely during one 12-hour period, from 8pm to 8am. A cell of ethnically ambiguous 'anti-capitalists' has seized the Peterson-Daniels chemical facility and threatens large-scale devastation. Looking to catch the tail end of the 24 zeitgeist, the narrative pings back and forth from one character to the next as they pursue their individual objectives: Ben, the news cameraman, stakes his life for the prize-winning footage; Tanya, the secretary, simply wishes to be somewhere else; Dave, the overlooked security guard, is out to save his co-workers. Already, the potential tagline forms in the mind: 'It's Irwin Allen meets Die Hard before shaking hands with *Resident Evil Zero* and making off with *Cold Winter*'s trousers'. Or perhaps not.**



Though *Without Warning* takes place entirely in one facility, concept art such as this highlights the level of distinction between the game's different locations. It's hoped that this subtle diversity will make for an authentic experience



THE FIRST TIME AROUND

The Smith brothers' time at Core Design is, of course, synonymous with the birth of Lara Croft; but their resumé extends farther back than 1996's *Tomb Raider*. Amiga owners will fondly remember such titles as *Corporation, Heimdall, Wolfchild* and *Chuck Rock* (as will Mega Drive owners thanks to the company being one of only six to receive Sega publisher status). Leading up to the initial Saturn release of *Tomb Raider*, they oversaw development of three more games exclusively for Mega CD – *Battlecorps, BC Racers* and *Soulstar*. Though the three titles made innovative use of scaled and rotated sprites to achieve their 3D look, none rocked the world enough to reverse the fortunes of their platform. The brothers' subsequent fortunes, of course, now sit among the pages of gaming history books.



Don't expect any massive surprises in terms of *Without Warning*'s weapons collection. This is, afterall, a title grounded in reality where the the loadout is very much of the *Rainbow Six*/*Delta Force* variety



The team has gone to great lengths to ensure that character animations are convincing. As we walk about their desks, various staff are tuning the most intricate of movements, ironing out those dreaded moonwalk effects

So amicable was the split from Eidos that the team was entitled to use any of the tools they'd developed



put demons to rest? "One of our key goals was that we were never going to work like we'd worked before. We said: 'If we're going to have to work those hours, we're all doing something wrong – the whole company'. So we looked at why that was happening. We had lots of grey areas at Core because we were always running at 1,000 miles an hour – we could never stop the ball from rolling."

He doesn't mince words when given the opportunity to compare the two companies: "I couldn't even describe how different they are – they're poles apart. Fifteen months ago, when we started, that was a personal concern – could we move on from what we'd all worked in for so long, were we capable? That was one of our main goals and a big tick's been put in it." But if there's one striking similarity between old school and new, it's the unique perspective of the two patriarchs. "Jeremy's role was very much a publisher's role at Eidos and at Core. We could [with Circle] sit down and go: 'Well, with my Eidos publishing hat on, I know what they're looking for'. I think that's a very different dynamic than when a team is successful and they think 'I've had enough of this company, I'm going to piss off and get some venture capital and fund something for six months'. We had a very different model than that – we had a different skillset from day one".

Circle's poaching of staff established the company's entire talent pool in one hit. Programmers, texture artists, modellers and writers were all on board for the moment, three months later (having "all found where the coffee machine was") that the doors opened. So amicable was the split from Eidos that the team was entitled to use any of the tools they'd developed during the previous 15 years. Accordingly, they went and used none of them. Perhaps it was that technical battle with *Angel Of Darkness* (one that cost the game its control system and pretty much everything else bar its graphics) that wiped the blackboard clean and chalked up RenderWare instead.

"I don't think," insists Smith, "that's any reflection on whether or not we thought [our tools] were good or bad; the programmers came and said, 'Look, we want to develop a game and concentrate on key elements such as the gameplay, rather than fight with technology'." Was there a reluctance to take up RenderWare? "There was, not so much from myself but maybe from Jeremy. He felt that we were going to lose one of our key elements as a developer of having 20 programmers who had all written numerous engines and, suddenly, going out and saying to publishers: 'Actually, it's Renderware and we're not doing any of that work ourselves'. Jeremy believed that, maybe, we were going to lose an edge from that."

Out of the equation, however, went the thorn that felled Lara Croft (sales of two million units being the net that stopped that becoming a fatal descent). Circle is currently looking into RenderWare 4, streamlining the company so as to facilitate it to the highest degree possible. Though as little as five per cent of the current version is cited as remaining in *Without Warning*, that's five per cent spread across the entire game.

To understand the background of Circle's first game is to see its manifesto in operation. Everyone's very proud of one particular piece of infrastructure – an assets management system that's unified the team at every level. They have a right to be pleased. The Circle Studio intranet is a testing environment accessible to everyone everywhere; AI, models,





Though it features a lock-on mechanic that's typical of thirdperson games, *Without Warning* differs in both its FPS influence and the degree to which aim can be fine tuned for those valuable headshots

CORE CONCERN

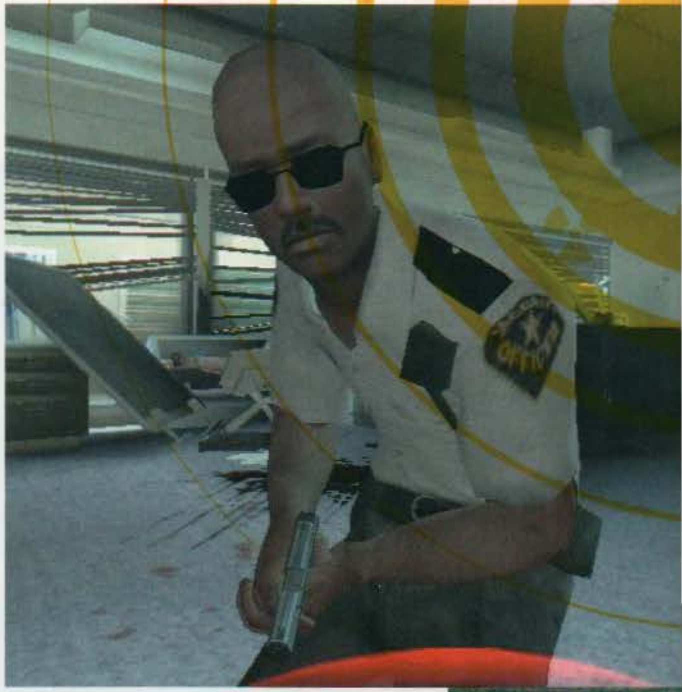
The departure of the Smith brothers following *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* was by no means the end of Core Design; not even the fact that a mere handful of staff remained in the studio was enough to finish it off. Now, still situated within a mile of Circle, the company is finishing off its first game on PSP while continuing work on another. The first to be released will be *Smart Bomb* – a neat concept in which the player must defuse a succession of tiered, AI-controlled explosives within strict time limits. Then comes a project provisionally titled *Free Running*, based on the urban phenomenon known as parkour. For those who haven't seen Jump Britain, the 'sport' champions the somewhat reckless act of pacing across rooftops and other such environments while, ideally, avoiding side effects such as plummeting to your death.

textures and scripts can be edited, annotated and tested with remarkable efficiency. If this is how they chase an ideal then the ball is, very smoothly, rolling in the right direction.

Of course, at some point the brothers' corporate meditation has to take its pigs to market; to this end we find them, somewhat surprisingly, headed east to Capcom.

"Jeremy and Gary Dale [currently MD of Capcom Europe] have quite a history," Smith reveals, "because, strangely enough, when we originally sold Core, Gary was very involved with BMG. They were very much a front-runner with the company who would eventually buy Core Design. I think that the contact initially came from Gary to Jeremy and they got chatting." Which begs the question, of course, as to why a company with a long, lucrative tradition of publishing classically Japanese games would approach a UK developer making a shooter about terrorists. "Those days of Japanese-developed products being huge over here have certainly changed; I think that's certainly been realised in Japan, not only from the UK. I think they need a stable balance," Smith continues. "We respect Capcom massively because one thing they've always done is bring great IP to the market. That was very similar to ourselves – we'd always held that we'd done that, so there was a great synergy with them."

***Without Warning*, then,** is a thirdperson shooter with the threat of terrorism at its core. Taking place solely within a besieged chemical plant (an arena that



Despite his role, there's not a trace of that Bruce Willis smirk about Dave, the overlooked security guard

inspired Smith when, interestingly, he used to work in one), the game puts players in control of six characters of various backgrounds and with differing agendas. This is somewhat misleading: three of the characters are, in fact, survivors of the same ill-fated military unit, under a single order to neutralise the anti-capitalist aggressors. Not, you might think, the groundbreaking concept that'll inject another Lara Croft into the collective subconscious (and a few million into the coffers). But then it's an assumption to think that it should be, and a team of ex-Core employees could tell you a thing or two about making assumptions, especially those involving videogame megastars.

Both Adrian Smith, Thompson and, presumably, Jeremy Smith are well aware of how difficult it would be to fashion another cash cow. They are, in fact, more realistic about it than most. "If we did another female game," confirms Smith, "we were going to get crucified, while a male singleplayer game falls into the whole melee of games that are out there at the moment. We did discuss it, but we hope that a *Without Warning* franchise is about the various things that can happen rather than the six characters in this first game". This is very much the fulfilment of last year's comments to **Edge**, wherein the brothers described their initial goal as being 'to take the risk out of the equation'. They're playing it as safe as it can be played, and the current sales charts provide little argument



The team's attention to the single environment is commendable. The chemical plant is suitably conveyed as an intricate network of pipes and valves, creeping over its interior like vines and haemorrhaging their toxic contents when shot

TITLE: **WITHOUT WARNING**
FORMAT: **PS2, XB**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CIRCLE STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **SEPTEMBER**



"If we did another female game we were going to get crucified, while a male singleplayer game falls into the whole melee of other games"



Above: Circle Studio's development head Adrian Smith. Right (from left): Andrew Thompson (producer), Gary Tonge (lead background), Richard Flower (lead programmer), Oli Clarke-Smith (lead gameplay), Graham Gallagher (lead animator)

against a startup doing that. "Sometimes, the publishers really need to know what the game is – 'It's a sweet, sugary brown drink: ooh, it's Coke'." By design, then, *Without Warning* is a soft drink of gaming concepts.

Circle is convinced that, by exploiting seldom-used movie devices, it can invigorate a straight concept that employs but one environment. "We wanted to remove the frustration," explains Smith, "of people moving in and out of locations with no one really 'getting it'. In *Tomb Raider*, it was always a pain in the arse – one minute she was in China, the next she was in Peru. Why couldn't she just be in one temple and the whole game take place in that?" He elaborates: "Quite early on, we came up with the idea of playing the scenario and then being able to go back and replay it but know that ten guys are going to jump through the window. So we shut those blinds or put booby traps on them so that, when the guys jump through the window, they blow up." The game's other hook involves control. Smith identifies the original *GoldenEye* as the inspiration for what is, essentially, a firstperson game disguised as thirdperson. "We used to have a pseudo-firstperson, over-the-shoulder view. The problem was that you could play the whole game in that view and we didn't want that – we may as well have made the game firstperson from the get go." Capcom, we agree, may not have warmed so much to that idea. "They've got such a longer history than Europe and the US of actually seeing their characters on screen."

In the test levels available, this control system is more or less all we can evaluate. The game truly is a firstperson shooter in disguise, though thirdperson elements such as lock-on are there to facilitate your avatar's more demanding manoeuvres. There are real-world physics, dynamic lighting and complicated geometry (within the confines of its industrial milieu), together with particle effects coupled religiously to every texture. Truth be told, it's a pleasant-looking game, though our concerns regarding how convincingly (and rewardingly) the game exploits its premise and setting will have to wait for a more thorough preview.

Without Warning is, we're assured, "about six weeks off completion." Extensive scrutiny will presumably be applied once Capcom puts it in the hands of its Japanese testers. These are, after all, interesting early steps for both companies. "We're learning lots," admits Smith, "because we've never been here, and I think they're learning lots because they've never had the exposure to a UK office." Perhaps, in September, when their efforts hit the shelves, we'll also learn something – the true meaning of Circle: is it the ring of protection that's brought 'Lara's boys' this far, or the cycle of rebirth that will finally take them elsewhere?

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing...

World Of WarCraft



Each night begins the same way: a handful of characters setting out from Kalimdor's vast cities, looking for loot, leather and laughter under the star-speckled night sky...
VIVENDI, PC

World Of WarCraft



...and, once satisfied, finding that there's still a few things to sort before finally heading to bed: letters to write, ore to extract, armour to patch and fish to cook...
VIVENDI, PC

World of WarCraft



...ready and waiting for the day shift, cramming in a quick quest before breakfast and planning the raids for the moment night falls and backup flies in from the east.
VIVENDI, PC

Piff paff poof

Why modern magicians need joysticks, not wands



The downloadable content in *Wipeout Pure*, like these special **Edge** decals, may be nothing new for PC gamers. But to see a PSP game – sealed inside its perfect black shell – evolve and change is a strikingly magical process

When you think of all the things you regularly do in games – defy death, move things with your mind, summon elemental monsters, and turn corpses into gold – it's little wonder that a word you hear again and again is 'magic'. Games make us all magicians.

But to call a game magic is to suggest a comparison with a very strange phenomenon indeed, not least because magic isn't what it used to be. For many of the people reading this magazine, their first awareness of magic is linked indelibly with a balding shorty whose main superpowers seemed to include being able to get rather more attractive women into bed. Now when you say magic, most people don't think wands, wizards and witchcraft, they think of David Copperfield's tan.

Where magic once was a watchword for the truly unexplainable, it's now come to represent the pleasures of watching a theatrical charlatan. Whether it's the shallow confidence of David Blaine or the unfathomable skill of Ricky Jay, the thrill is no longer that we're watching something inexplicable. It's become precisely the opposite: of watching something so astonishing we no longer mind that the explanation for it is a mundane mix of substitution, misdirection and years and years of practice.

And it's with that in mind that it seems more appropriate than ever to say that seeing **Edge**'s logo implanted in a *Wipeout Pure* track is magical, to say that shooting from one screen to the other in *Catch! Touch! Yoshi* is magical. The mundane explanations behind these things are at the lowest rung of game technology. Even if you're phobic about anisotropic filtering and pixel shaders you can understand the process of slapping a picture into a frame. Even if the thought of quadratics turns you green you can grasp the simple process behind plotting a curve from one screen to another.

And it's that which makes these moments magical – the gap between the simple structures behind them and the impact that they have on the player. It's that alchemy – of making the plain into the spectacular – that is at the heart of modern magic, and games do it as well as any spotlight-hungry American with a big budget and a gaudy suit.







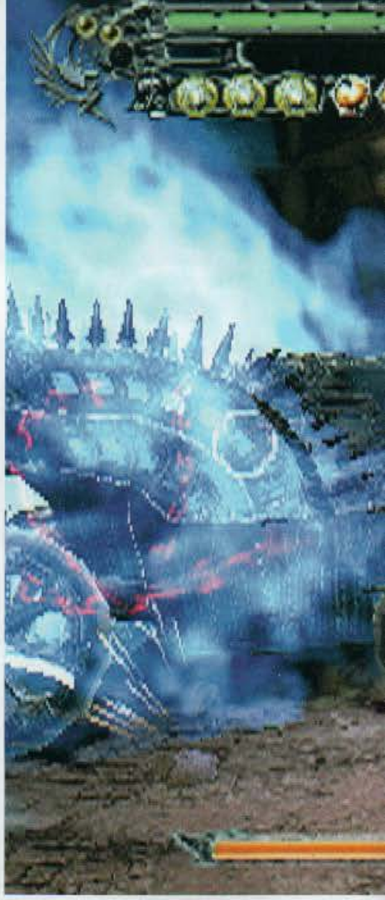


Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



DEVIL MAY CRY 3

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800, $50, £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), MARCH 25 (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (PROD STUDIO 1) PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E143, E146





Shin Megami Tensei character designer Kazuma Kaneko returns the favour for Dante's guest appearance in *SMT: Nocturne* with a devilishly handsome Devil Trigger form (top)

So, after two dress rehearsals to shake out the trappings of *Resident Evil* and find his own style, it's finally showtime for Capcom's leading man. How the auditorium will fill out after the first gig's volume deafened casual players, and the second proved too chart-friendly for those who liked the old school better than the nu school remains to be seen – but this might well be the number you've been waiting for.

Visualised as a mix of the series' traditional urban gothic and the classical leanings of the ill-fated *Chaos Legion*, *DMC3* is perhaps the most evocative, exuberant dark fantasy Capcom has produced since *Ghouls 'N' Ghosts*. It's not just dark fantasy, but dark fantastic, from the menacing symmetry and scale of the Bruegel-esque tower that rudely erupts in Dante's neighbourhood to the gangs of baying, swooping reapers that you'll return to the sand inside it.

Whether these battles are cast in glitzy neon, sallow candlelight or silver moonbeams, Dante never leaves the spotlight, his older incarnations in *DMC*s *1* and *2* apparently having forgotten more moves than they could learn from all the Red Orbs in the world. An impressive enough street samurai armed with pistols and swords alone, as Dante's arsenal grows – weapons are cleverly bequeathed by each defeated boss, so you already know their cause and special effects – so do the possibilities to extend the series' peerless fusion of swordsmanship and bullet ballet.

Impressive enough armed with pistols and swords, as Dante's arsenal grows so do the possibilities to extend the fusion of swordsmanship and bullet ball

Two ranged and two melee weapons can be equipped at a time, and can be switched on a shoulder button press mid-swing or trigger-pull without interrupting Dante's flourish. Far beyond a simple, but welcome, bypass for the genre's habitually cumbersome menu management, it quickly becomes second nature to open with an attack from one weapon and close with another, or even to cycle through all four in an unrelenting shower of blows.

The unnatural laws of *DMC3*'s physics are equally reliable and exploitable: when a boss produces an attack that affects the entire arena floor, you instinctively hold Dante aloft on the kickback from his gunfire. The equal and opposite reaction of a mid-air uppercut is that Dante will land on his feet with time to dispatch a second enemy before the first lands. And, crucially, combat is as enjoyable to play badly as it is to play well (Dante is irrepressible even in defeat, somersaulting out of a stagger or breakdancing up from a





The expert play style, Royal Guard, allows Dante to execute last-second blocks – though the theory and practice are often worlds apart – and then return a hugely meaty open-palmed counter



Localisation difficulties



The Japanese version of *DMC3* (which features full English text) shares the sympathetic continue system of *Resident Evil 4*, allowing you to return to the game immediately from just before Dante's demise, but the US release returns to the maddening *DMC1* scheme of requiring that you buy Yellow Orbs for the privilege, and ups the difficulty as an added affront. The PAL version is to retain free continues, and will slightly scale down the US version's Normal difficulty.







Secret Missions make a comeback, with 12 scattered throughout the game's main levels: these generally apply specific conditions to a replay of a set-piece moment, such as the speeding train shootout below





DMC3 still finds time for calm moments between storms, and while the colour scheme is earthier than some of the original's most striking scenery, it's a more assured design overall. Much of the scale is for show, not exploration, which is a shame considering Dante's architecture-scaling acrobatic talents

knockdown), though diving into the system's depths rather than furiously thrashing on its surface is a requirement for the more aggressive difficulties.

Even so, it's a game that's unexpectedly willing to let you set the rules for how you want to play a *Devil May Cry* game, whether that involves favouring gunfighting, close combat, or a balanced offence supported by either dodges or block-and-counters. *DMC3*'s fighting styles, as with your equipped weapon sets, can be reassigned between missions or at power-up points, should you find a particular section requires a differently skilled approach: Gunslinger's crowd control properties are wasted on the mano-a-demonio boss encounters, for instance, where you'll be better served by a defensive boost.

Flexible, smart, and needless to say stylish, if the system has a drawback it's that some of the interplay between acrobatics and action introduced in *DMC2* has been sectioned off. It's impossible to use a Trickster wall-run and backflip to set up a Gunslinger hail of bullets, but then asking to cycle styles in addition to weapons and interruptible combo attacks is probably a little too much even for a Capcom studio that at last understands its game enough to be at the top of it.

That understanding sadly hasn't extended to moving the genre beyond the club-footed Insert Occult Object To Continue progression – though there's at least the placebo this time around of the items being more inventive than Rusty Keys, and the game's flow often steers you to the key before the lock. But that flow, so rollercoaster-fast for much of the game's 20 missions, sets itself up to disappoint when the pacing finally slips. The idle backtracking and wearisome boss fight reruns in the last third of the game age *DMC3* beyond its years – though it still knows to save some of its most memorable moments for last.

Not least the finale of its storyline, a magnificent contrast of B-movie fluff with triple-A production. The portrait of Dante as a young man at last finds the self-parodying, haughty cool the previous games first overshot, then underplayed – and his supporting cast brood and doublecross with the conviction that this is the last world-threatening plot that will ever play out in a Japanese videogame.

It's a strange situation for the series to truly hit its stride in a game that's both beginning and conclusion, and you can't help but wish Dante would never grow up, that there could have been more stories of his teenage roundhouse kicks. The most damning criticism of *DMC3* is also its highest praise: this is a brashly overconfident music video of a game that thoughtlessly tramples (with 18-hole cherry Doc Martens) where more reserved titles have the sense not to tread. And the devil may cry encore. **[8]**







There's commendable variety in both of Dante's arsenals, with melee weapons ranging from twin elemental swords to a vampiric electric guitar (above left), and ranged weapons culminating in a devastating rocket launcher (above right), complete with the overkill of a machete-sized bayonet



STAR FOX: ASSAULT

FORMAT: GC PRICE: $50 (£26)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), APRIL (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NAMCO





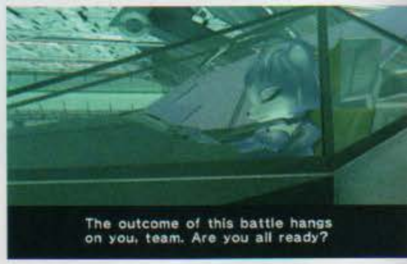


The game's cut-scenes are absurd two-minute melodramas, sketching out a story that's almost a parody of space-opera conventions. Fox even comes close to screaming 'You are not my father'. They're entertaining but cheesy, complementing the simple characters

Fox McCloud and his starfighting team of anthropomorphic clichés have never been the most charismatic icons in the Nintendo stable. Their inoffensive gung ho and mildly spiced banter certainly bring atmosphere and an important sense of comradeship to *Star Fox* games, but in themselves they're wholly unremarkable, blandly westernised in both appearance and character. You suspect they were only incorporated in the original SNES showpiece and its N64 sequel to make those slick on-rails shooters, with their very traditional sci-fi trappings, more easily identifiable as Nintendo product, more in tune with the company's cute image and fondness for personality cults.

To assume they were central to the attraction of those games is a miscalculation; to go one further and attempt to found a franchise on their dubious charm alone is worse. That's exactly what Nintendo did with its thinly veiled rebranding of Rare's sprawling *Dinosaur Planet* as *Star Fox Adventures*, and what is has done again (to a lesser extent) with this hybrid blaster from Namco. *Star Fox: Assault* is nothing like the antithesis of the original games that *Adventures* was, but it still fails to understand their streamlined strength and structural ingenuity, and for much of its length it still keeps the furry fighter ace front and centre, in plain view, with his feet on the ground.





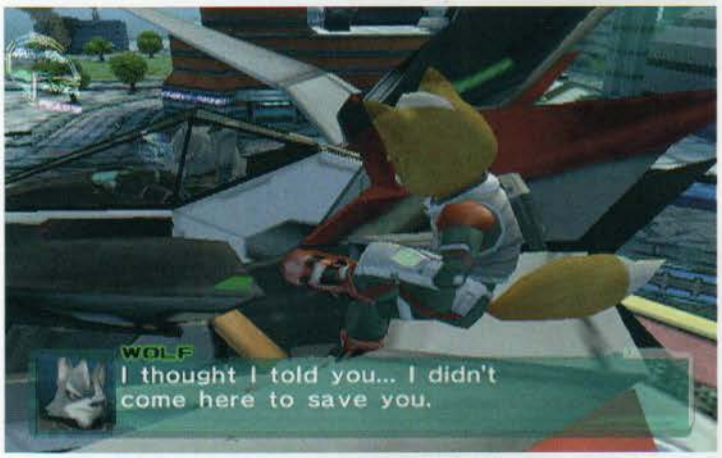
Krystal – the unappetising vixen from *Star Fox Adventures* – returns, implausibly replacing the ageing Peppy Hare as an Arwing pilot. This does the team dynamic, the overall strength of the cast, and indeed the feminist cause no favours at all

Violent neon colours abound, and Namco has accentuated the series' crisp, insectoid designs with an angular, manga-influenced flavour of its own

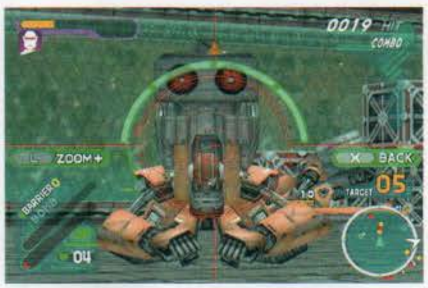
At least, in rough terms, it's the right shape and size for a *Star Fox* game: a brief blast through ten levels of set-piece shooting, with the emphasis firmly on replayability. In *Assault*'s case the latter comes in the form of three difficulty levels, each with its own set of medals for high scores, plus hidden flags to find. A more familiar and stronger pull will simply be a desire to see and do it all again, but better, keeping your teammates alive, holding on to your power-ups, revelling in your half-learned, half-instinctive command of the patterned destruction. It's slender, but it's enough, and if you like it you will come back.

It looks right, too. Initially underwhelming in these late-generational days of *Resident Evil 4* and its peers, you'll come to appreciate *Assault*'s old-school, arcadey, hard-poly look. Violent neon colours abound, and Namco has accentuated the series' crisp, insectoid designs with an angular, manga-influenced flavour of its own. It suits the subject matter well, and moves with incredible speed and smoothness, even at its busiest, and even on the ground (Fox and co are remarkably fleet-footed avatars). The soundtrack, too, is quintessential *Star Fox*: the repeating, adolescent exclamations are as annoying as ever, but the bright sting of the effects is perfect, and the music is even better. It's an impressively stirring full orchestral score that uses every trick in the John Williams book to heighten the sense of spectacle and adventure, and it makes a huge contribution to exciting and involving the player.

So *Assault* looks like a *Star Fox* game, sounds like a *Star Fox* game and, even at its furthest remove from the original template, feels like a *Star Fox* game, in that it never deviates from a frenzied and undeniably



The Star Wolf team serve up the expected dogfight, and more besides. In a neat touch, the score is augmented by the blare of a Morricone-style mariachi trumpet whenever they make an appearance









Assault's most surprising variation on the *Star Fox* theme is the simple but thrilling wing-walking mode









Lylat Wars' Landmaster tank returns, but sadly doesn't reprise its unstoppable on-rails trundle from that game. It's only available in arena levels, where it proves underexploited



Seasoned FPS players will find the on-foot weapon set lacking in presence and tactical sophistication. But this is a different game, so fast-paced and hair-triggered it makes *TimeSplitters* look cerebral, and the lightweight arsenal suits it

enjoyable drive to push up the hit count (assisted by a combo meter this time). It isn't a true *Star Fox* game, however. It would, of course, be hard pressed to satisfy the purists who felt that even *Star Fox 64* (or *Lylat Wars*) betrayed the original *Star Fox* (or *Starwing*) with its occasional deviations from on-rails, airborne action. Though their case is overstated, they have a point: at its best, the series is a very simple, fiercely single-minded design, one that derives all its strength from its cohesion and its strong sense of identity. That's exactly what *Assault* – part retro shoot 'em up, part arena combat title, and arcade game that never was – lacks.

Less than a third of it is spent flying into the screen, and these sections, though strong enough, are pale retreads of the dramatic scripting of Nintendo's earlier efforts; they're also shorn of the forks in the road that made *Lylat Wars* such a joy to return to. The majority of the game is made up of free-roaming battles that are shakier still, though pleasantly variegated by changing objectives and the ability to hop into a Landmaster tank or Arwing fighter almost at will. The design of these levels is altogether too influenced by the need to create effective multiplayer maps. The game itself feels as if it was scattered loosely around them, rather than woven into them, and as often as not you'll have to go looking for the action yourself.

In all honesty, they weren't worth this heavy cost to the singleplayer campaign. *Assault* represents yet another failed attempt to furnish the Cube with a deathmatch classic to equal *GoldenEye*. On foot, four players can easily feel lost in the huge maps, and the tiny characters can be hard to see. In the air, dogfighting remains a looping, U-turning stalemate. At its best in mixed vehicular combat, it's an adequately entertaining rumble, but not much of a reason to unplug your bongos.

Perhaps the saddest misunderstanding in *Assault*, though, is its pedestrian, linear structure. There's nothing wrong with it, but the multiple routes and secret branches of the earlier titles – echoing *OutRun*, in a way – bound levels together into a taut, short, player-directed adventure that was always seamless and could never be fully experienced in one sitting. That structure above all else is what made them special, what gave them a life of their own. Without it, *Assault* is a jumbled, disposable thrill. **[6]**

Trouble and strafe



Star Fox: Assault **offers three control schemes for grounded blasting. The first is a fine single-stick solution: move with the stick, hold down R to aim, mash that fat A button to fire. Holding L with left or right allows you to strafe, but clicking it produces a swift dodge that brilliantly echoes the Arwing's evasive roll, ideal for ducking in and out of cover. The second is a conventional twin-stick arrangement with fire on R. It's poorly calibrated, but the ability to move and aim simultaneously – and to circle-strafe – will still probably give an edge in multiplayer. That's a shame, since it robs the game of some of its individuality, and of a signature move. (The third is a reversal of the first, so requires a button to be held down to move – and it's frankly perverse.)**





There are not many vehicle sections, but when they arrive they're underwhelming and lack any kind of freedom of expression. Vehicles in the multiplayer maps can be more amusing, however



TIMESPLITTERS: FUTURE PERFECT

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 25
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: FREE RADICAL DESIGN PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E145

Those waiting for *GoldenEye Mk II* still have a bit of waiting to do. Unfair, perhaps – after all, Free Radical has never claimed that it's attempting to build a game based on that benchmark title – but it's still disappointing to find yet another stolid singleplayer campaign in a *TimeSplitters* game. Sure, it's only a third of an otherwise excellent package, but you can't help wondering if the magic has gone.

Indeed, the disillusionment is more keenly felt because *Future Perfect*'s Story mode was meant to address the linearity issues that dogged the previous two games. The production values are higher, the cut-scenes better and the plotting marginally more engaging, but as a game it's as on-rails as ever. This is corridor and checkpoint running at its most constrained. *TimeSplitters* may well be a thoroughbred brand, but it's still a heavily blinkered one.

The addition of some vehicle sections only emphasises the issue. Partnering up with other NPCs (or hero Cortez's future/past self), it's possible to drive or shoot depending on the scenario, but there are few wide-open spaces to explore the destructive possibilities that vehicles usually bring. What you get instead is the crushing inevitability of another narrow corridor to trundle along until an impassable barrier is reached. It's as if vehicles were put in just so another bullet point could be put on the back of the box.

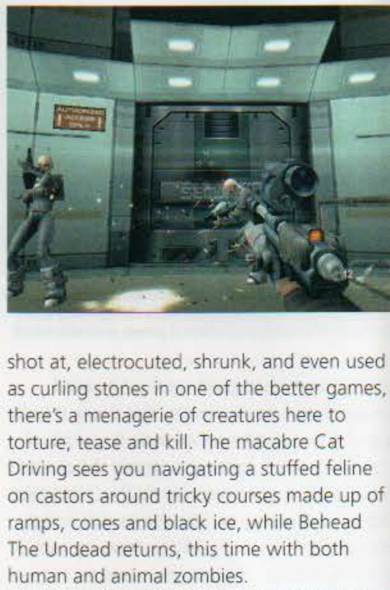


Ultimately, the game lacks dynamism because every level feels like a target range, with few enemies posing an intelligent threat. They may have personality, a gamut of interesting weapons, and are drawn with a comical attention to detail, but for the most part they stand on the spot or just perform pre-canned animated rolls to avoid your fire. Some huge, diabolical bosses also make it into Story mode but they are of the lumbering type and require simple find-the-vulnerable-spot tactics to defeat. On the plus side, Story mode is more entertaining played cooperatively, but it's still lagging behind the competition.

> Monkeys can be shot at, electrocuted, shrunk and even used as curling stones. There's a menagerie of creatures here to torture, tease and kill



Apparently the BBFC's ratings altered while *Future Perfect* was in development and its macabre nature enforced an 18+ rating. Rather than tone things down, Free Radical decided to include blood for the first time



The monkeys save it. Which is to say that the Challenges and Arcade options give *Future Perfect* a spirit and reason to exist when friends are unavailable. While it's true the Challenges are either frustratingly difficult or extraordinarily addictive, it's their pick'n'mix quality that makes them all the more attractive. Although monkeys can be shot at, electrocuted, shrunk, and even used as curling stones in one of the better games, there's a menagerie of creatures here to torture, tease and kill. The macabre Cat Driving sees you navigating a stuffed feline on castors around tricky courses made up of ramps, cones and black ice, while Behead The Undead returns, this time with both human and animal zombies.

Arcade is split into two categories: Arcade (all the multiplayer games but against bots) and League (a series of specific games against increasingly aggressive bots). The range and enjoyment of tasks in Arcade mode alone is enough to keep you engrossed for weeks – but these are also perfect training grounds for the real battles that take place online or against friends over System Link in splitscreen. In Arcade, weapon sets, bot abilities and various game settings can be customised, increasing its lifespan until you tire of only playing against AI opponents.

Played with a group of friends, *Future Perfect* is exceptional. Pacey, technically exquisite and frenetic, multiplayer matches are as absorbing a game experience as

Some neat paradoxes allow Cortez to meet himself and overcome the bigger challenges. While one Cortez takes care of the henchmen, the other launches SAMs at the gunship













you'll find. The brilliance is in the fairness and speed, the turgid singleplayer AI now replaced with quick-witted mayhem and comic excess. While *Halo 2* may offer a more considered, tactical approach to the multiplayer space, *Future Perfect* asks only that your reflexes are acutely honed. A shallower kind of arena combat, perhaps, but no less addictive for it.

New game types include Vampire (killing others extends your life span), Gladiator (only the person who is 'it' can score) and Shrink (kill a foe to reduce his size), and the customisation possibilities ensure that this could remain a vital piece of software for years to come. Old favourite arenas return, including the Mexican village and the classic *TimeSplitters* Chinese map, but there are also wonderful new maps like the hazy wastes and muddy trenches of Vietnam and the labyrinthine Temple.

The new Mapmaker feature also gives players the chance to create their own arenas (see 'Tile craft') to play online, or even download those made by others. As with the rest of the game's online options, it's only once the servers are densely populated with keen cat riders and maniacal monkey assassins that their real potential will be revealed; at this point, however, there's little doubt that the stage is set for something substantial and satisfying.

As forgettable as the Story mode is, this is a game that should be judged by the pleasure it can bring to a room full of gamers eager for furious arena combat and a splendid variety of team games. And judged by those criteria it has few peers. **[8]**

In as humorous a plate-spinning variant as you could imagine (right) you use your electrotool to encourage the monkeys to dance the night away, but beware of the explosive consequences of over-charging them







A stuffed cat on castors travelling at speed across black ice turns out to be just as unstable as it sounds. Corner too tightly and the cat will tip over and lose you vital seconds, but it is possible to flip kitty back up on to his stiff little legs again

Both two- and fourplayer splitscreen modes are available, naturally, and your Arcade matches can be played with bots for extra action. *TimeSplitters 2*'s right-stick 'waggle' aiming system has now been dropped for a more traditional move-and-look approach

Tile craft



Mapmaker always felt like a cute addon in the previous *TimeSplitters* titles, mainly because map sizes and sharing possibilities were limited. With dedicated servers set up to upload and download arenas for network and standalone play, however, the scope of the tool expands massively. It's possible to build singleplayer Story maps complete with basic game logic and short messages and also create Assault levels for online team play. Vehicles, stuffed cats, explosive barrels and some furniture can be added, but it's still disappointing not to be able to mix and match tiles from different themes. While there may not be as many distinct tile types as we'd hoped, you still have to hand it to Free Radical – this is a tremendous technical achievement.





Exploring the ship reveals countless scenes of blood-spattered carnage (above), and coming across its reanimated inhabitants sets up a few more (right). Unlike in *Resident Evil 4*, you can move and strafe while shooting, although that doesn't help much when using the pistol, which can be truly maddening



COLD FEAR

FORMAT: PC, XBOX, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: DARKWORKS PREVIOUSLY IN: E143, E147



Cold Fear has a style all of its own, whether you're exposed to the elements out on the deck of a whaling ship (above) or exploring undersea environments via a glass-walled tunnel elsewhere (right). These two scenes illustrate the two styles of camera – main and over-the-shoulder (used in combat)

Evil twin



Some of the details in *Cold Fear* are such that it's almost as if developer Darkworks wanted to be seen to be paying homage to Capcom's *Resident Evil 4*. From the laser-sighted weapons and the over-the-shoulder combat viewpoint to the parasite-driven plot points, those who recently played the fourth *Evil* will feel immediately among familiar territory here. Weirdly, though, it turns out to be coincidence, the French and Japanese developers working independently and just happening to arrive at some of the same places. We've seen those sparkly item identifiers in previous *Evils*, though…

Game makers have yet to explore all manner of avenues in their quest to make their works seem more realistic, but one of the most obviously overlooked is weather. Quite why is a mystery, since it's obvious from even something as simplistic as *A Link To The Past* that the splash of teeming rain can add an extra dimension of atmosphere to a scene. And *Cold Fear* has buckets of the stuff, along with monstrously swollen waves which crash over the sides of the whaling vessel you've been charged to investigate. The result is one of the wettest games on record, and an exercise in rich, flavoursome environments.

Inside and away from the elements, however, you must face the reality of an ocean-going life: the ship is all plain grey and green metal, boxy rooms and long, narrow corridors. Which doesn't help navigation, especially given the unusual absence of a map and the fact that every sign you encounter is written in Russian (pointing your weapon towards one reveals a translation), making getting about the place occasionally a strain, especially if you've missed a detail or two among the game's dark recesses.

Of more consequence is your standard-issue weapon, a pistol you'll swear is firing blanks once you've lined up what appears to be a perfect headshot on an enemy only to miss it completely for the third time in a row. Praise be for the healthy roster of additional arms, from a shotgun to a grenade launcher to a modified spear gun whose enemy-luring gas sets up some tremendously entertaining opportunities for laying down traps. It is a shame you do not get a wider variety of enemy types to gun down and blow up; Darkworks' baddies are mostly reanimated corpses, with only a handful of truly twisted adversaries to really rattle your cage.

This is just one area where *Cold Fear* does not stand up to comparison with *Resident Evil 4*, whose elaborate bosses, countless set pieces and disparate locations reveal it to be a work of much larger scale (and budget). By contrast, *Cold Fear* can feel ploddy (it doesn't truly kick into gear until you reach its second half), gimmicky (the Resistance meter is an interesting idea, but an underutilised one) and shallower, with fewer puzzles than even the Capcom game's meagre tally.

Taken in isolation, there's no denying *Cold Fear*'s panache – RenderWare has rarely been used to such strong visual effect – and there is a fair helping of survival horror entertainment to be had here, it's just that you have to dig through several layers of frustration to get at it. **[6]**



Certain weapons have built-in torches – essential in such a murkily lit game. These parasitic organisms have a habit of sneaking up on you: listen for their movements among the excellent audio







The ship is continuously tossed back and forth by the power of the ocean, and you're sometimes at risk of being washed overboard. A trip to the crow's nest provides an opportunity to take it all in (above)



Primary and secondary objectives feature, with 'opportunity' goals cropping up as levels progress. Uncompleted secondary objectives will, curiously, carry over to the next mission



SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: APRIL 1
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E141

Good stealth games aren't about chaos, but order: providing well-defined and rigid boundaries for the player to confidently work within. The moment some unpredictability enters the mix, you lose your trust, and things get messy. That's how the first *Splinter Cell* game felt, as the game's promise of hi-tech infiltration turned into something far more frustrating than expected. Sequel *Pandora Tomorrow* brought with it one of the most smart and captivating multiplayer modes of recent years, forcing the equally troubled solo campaign to remain in the background. But, finally, *Chaos Theory* is the game that the original *Splinter Cell* was meant to deliver: a tight play experience within a trusty framework, one more of enjoyment than irritation, and a game that's no longer exclusively for fans of repeated reloading.

The most significant change is the simplest: the player can now save whenever they want. It's a change that encourages experimentation without an intimidating risk, and allows players to get as much out of the experience as they want. Few missions make harsh requirements in terms of kills, alarms triggered or detection by the enemy and even when they do, the game is surprisingly lenient. Anyone troubled by this lack of rigour will be reassured by the fact that missions are rated, and accomplished espionage is rewarded by a suitably high score. It's a challenge which hinges on the tightness of your control over Sam Fisher. Here he feels even more natural and reliable in his movements – his predatory crouching walk has even more analogue subtlety, allowing you to freeze him at any point in his panther-like stalk, and move directly backwards into the shadows. Extra detail has been added elsewhere, too, in the form of control: Fisher can switch sides when aiming a weapon, allowing the player to choose their blind spot, while a raft of new enemy takedowns and options (choosing stealth- or assault-oriented equipment packages, lock/door breaking) are smoothly included.

Thanks to this increased ease of use and approachability, there's a genuine sense of anticipation to see what situation is round the next corner. It's enthusiasm, more than any sense of dread, that accompanies your progress. Fuelling this is the atmospheric richness of the environments. Spectacular lighting and textures are almost expected of a *Splinter Cell* game, but it's the glistening, wet slabs of rock that impress the most.

Ultimately, the game feels complete, both in terms of its solo campaign and the multiplayer packages, and perhaps represents as fine a return to form as a certain other threequel this month (see p90). *Chaos Theory* doesn't so much see Fisher hitting his stride as, thankfully, relaxing into it. **[8]**



Chaos Theory is shrouded in even more darkness than its predecessors, giving plentiful opportunity for improvised stealth strategies and silent kills



The PC version features an entirely new graphics engine, but that doesn't prevent the Xbox iteration from shining. It's water that's the star, whether through lashings of rain, trickles of run-off dotted around the environments or the gorgeous selection of wet rock textures on show





Water stealth kills, present in both PS2 and GameCube versions, are arbitrarily absent from the Xbox. The PS2 versus modes are running on the same engine as those in *Pandora Tomorrow*, while the Cube version omits this mode completely, due to its minimal online take-up

Flown the coop



As well as the enhanced return of *Pandora Tomorrow*'s excellent versus mode, *Splinter Cell*'s multiplayer suite is expanded even further thanks to a series of twoplayer cooperative missions, playable via Live, system link or splitscreen (only splitscreen on PS2 and GC). A set of unique teamwork moves are available, such as the Tomoe Nage, where one player throws the other across a long-jump distance, or to knock out a nearby guard. Pairs also have to take turns to jam cameras, while their partners pass by undetected. Four levels are available, making a significant campaign for those into the more productive aspect of social gaming, and splitscreen – on Xbox, at least – runs crisply without losing much detail.



Anya Romanov, your character, is an athletic little minx and navigates complex environments with the grace of a leopard – much enjoyment comes from swiftly and silently making your way through an obstacle-filled room showcasing *Stolen*'s neat realtime lighting and shadows



STOLEN

FORMAT: PC, XBOX, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: MARCH 25 PUBLISHER: HIP INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: BLUE52 PREVIOUSLY IN: E139, E140, E147

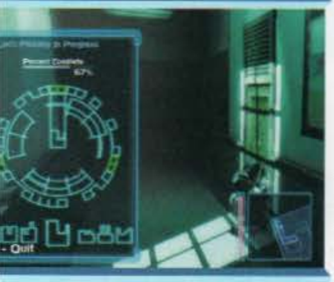
An apt name, cynics will say, considering that from the moment you start off *Stolen* you'll recognise elements of *Metal Gear Solid*, *Splinter Cell* and co. A thirdperson stealth adventure – in this case, one that features a high-tech-reliant lady thief with feline-like acrobatic skills – was never going to stray too far from the litter but it's easy to label this as another failed copycat attempt.

Too easy. Granted, the topdown HUD line map (complete with optional perception-zone cones – activated by tagging guards, cameras and sentinel drones with a tracking dart), the visibility meter and crawling through air shafts will seem worryingly familiar to a player hoping for new gaming ground to sneak their way through but *Stolen* is soon showing signs of its promised individuality. Though in essence a training level, the first mission (involving the theft of a precious stone from the city's highly guarded museum) nevertheless shares the marathon quality of subsequent assignments and should take the average gamer a couple of hours to complete. Within that time you'll be introduced to your character's beautifully animated and comprehensive athletic ability, you'll pick guards' pockets, get used to scanning rooms for potential loot, learn the skills of computer hacking and lock picking (see 'Pick of the bunch'), photograph artworks, and experiment with your arsenal in order to remain undetected.

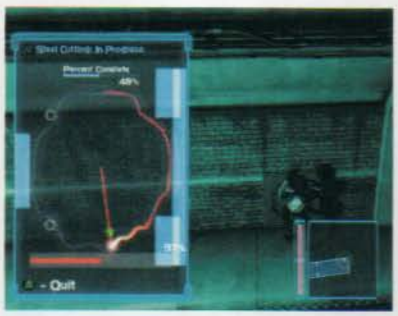
The latter point is crucial in more than simply the obvious in-game implication because it's when guards become aware of your presence that *Stolen* breaks down. Up until then you would have noticed how the camera can be awkward and disorientating, how some of the control mapping is ill thought out, how the game insists on highlighting navigational points in rooms with silly gleaming vapour emanating from key structures, and graphical glitches (torch beams shining through structures, say) – hardly game-breaking stuff, but capable of substantial disappointment when combined. But it's physical encounters with guards that most mar the experience. First, the fighting model is too limited, consisting of frustrated one-button presses that offer no guarantee of blows landing on the intended target. More often than not a guard who's standing within hugging distance will calmly strike you systematically until your health is depleted and not suffer a single bruise in return. Second, they're also intellectually limited, their AI suffering from too much artificiality and not enough intelligence, resulting in unconvincing staccato responses to stimuli as they abruptly switch from one state to another (something further compounded by early *Resident Evil*-like vocalisations).

The developer will no doubt argue the game's essence is to remain invisible (indeed, scores get heavily penalised for the number of times spotted and guard KOs) and within that constraint *Stolen* operates competently, easily capable of providing elegant moments of great enjoyment. But with competitors already offering accomplished stealth/action packages, it's impossible to dismiss the fact blue52 has clearly concentrated too heavily on executing one side of the equation. **[5]**

Pick of the bunch



One of *Stolen*'s finest elements is the way the developer has turned typically automated tasks into rewarding minigames. To name three, lock picking involves matching pin and barrel shapes, computer hacking requires replicating a sequence on a nine-square grid and steel cutting has you tracing a contour without straying too far from the designated path. It's a neat touch which cleverly integrates a character's in-game tasks into the player's experience and their smooth implementation (combined with the game's other stronger elements) suggests the ultimately disappointing *Stolen* experience doesn't fully reflect blue52's game-making ability.





Assisting in your duties are a number of aids: in addition t scanning rooms, your hi-tech specs offer zoom, night and sonic vision (a sonar map of adjoining room) options whil your arsenal is composed of nullifiers (which stun guards and disable electronic equipment), trackers, tripwires and sonic emitters to attract guards away from your position





The game is at its finest at moments such as the minigames (above) blue52 has included to engage players in the nitty-gritty of a thief's work – lock picking, computer hacking, safe cracking – but also welcome in terms of diversity are the *Tomb Raider*-like timed navigational puzzles that occasionally turn up. Sadly, encounters with enemy AI – particularly in combat (right) – are by far the weakest link in an otherwise enjoyable effort



CONSTANTINE

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCI DEVELOPER: BITS STUDIOS

Judged on the first hour of play, *Constantine* is dire. An opening section that sees you wandering through characterless rubble-strewn streets, shooting at poorly animated creatures against drab backdrops does nothing to engender enthusiasm. A floaty hero and cut-scenes rammed full of hackneyed one-liners ("Demons on Earth? That breaks all the rules") leaves you in little doubt you're in for another poorly executed movie-tie in. But *Constantine* gathers momentum and, despite some obvious shortcomings, rewards those who persevere.

Progress naturally brings a greater selection of weapons, and they're both amusing and novel. A shotgun that fires cartridge blasts in the shape of a crucifix, an automatic hand-cannon capable of propelling nails pulled from the flesh of martyrs, and a special mention must go to the imaginative, but crass, Moses' Shroud, 'a one-hit smart bomb area of effect weapon'. It would have been easy to introduce any one of these made-up religious contraptions just to mimic the movie, but each is soundly integrated into the fabric of the game.

Constantine has to tackle ever-more-threatening demons, and while they can generally be executed with any of the weapons, there's usually one that's strongest against a given foe. Not a new idea, clearly, but this lends the combat some subtlety and strategy, especially in the game's later sections. Throwing bottles of holy water at possessed humans before destroying the creature that scuttles out of the carcass with your Holy Shotgun is just one such tactic, and experimentation is both encouraged and rewarded.

The magic system is not so well conceived, and following on-screen button presses within very generous time limits gives it a touch of the Harry Potter. The shifting in between planes is also underused – it's a mechanic brilliantly implemented in *Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver*, but there's no flexibility here, just scripted moments when the player has to trigger the appropriate spell.

In *Constantine*, Hell itself is also a desultory location, not the dynamic Miltonesque fire and brimstone place you might imagine. Drawn with a palette that only stretches from manure brown to mocha it's sometimes difficult to distinguish the floor from the walls, but thankfully most of the action takes place back on Earth.

Constantine's narrative is compelling enough, and some excellent puzzles save it from the ignominy of being yet another average thirdperson movie tie-in, but only just. There are no difficulty spikes, thick-headed design decisions and the bonus materials, which include interviews with the cast, are genuinely worthwhile. Yes, it's uncomplicated, but still an engaging realisation of the source material. **[5]**





The crackling, pyrotechnic magical effects are pretty but add little to the game. When triggered, time slows down







Hell is a muddy brown, turgid kind of place and not particularly frightening. It does, however, provide contrast and variety from offing demons on Earth





The antisocial Bile-Riz climb inside corpses before attacking you. Hurt the possessed body enough and it will plop on to the floor, but you must dispatch it before it finds another host

Glow in the dark

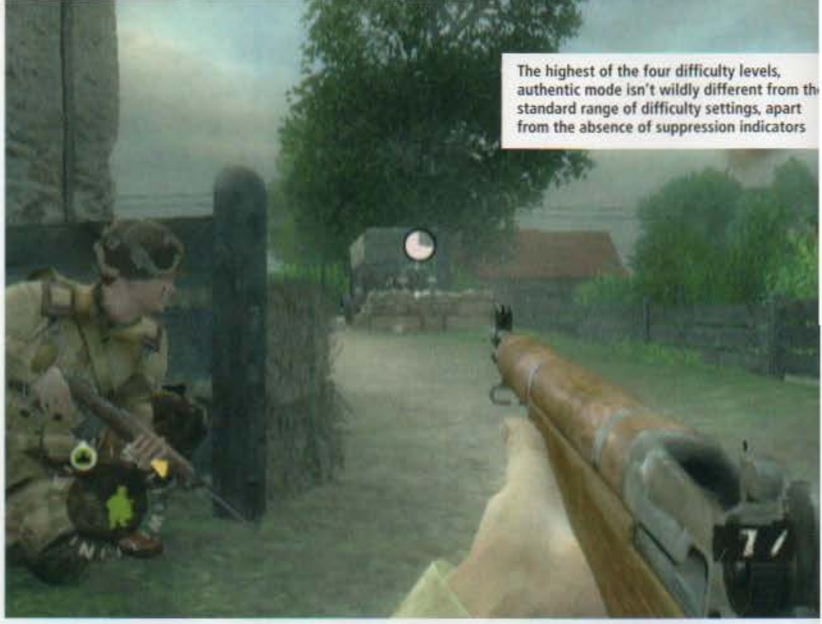


John Constantine's True Sight ability is by far his most versatile and useful. Similar 'second sight' features have made it into games before but here it has more than one application elevating it above gimmick status. Its primary function is to reveal demon glyphs; these show the way ahead, uncover secret hidey-holes and provide clues for solving some simple, but cleverly constructed puzzles. However, you'll also use True Sight to help collect up the hundreds of nails launched from your Crucifier. Using normal vision, they're far too small and insignificant to spot, but switch to True Sight and they emit a pale blue glow – perfect for the obsessive-compulsives who can't bear to leave anything behind.



BROTHERS IN ARMS: ROAD TO HILL 30

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 18 PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: GEARBOX



The highest of the four difficulty levels, authentic mode isn't wildly different from th standard range of difficulty settings, apart from the absence of suppression indicators

Stories are often just an excuse for war in videogames, or vice versa, but *Brothers In Arms* is hard to separate in such a cynical way. *Road To Hill 30* isn't a glorious, glamorous voyage, nor does it take in any tremendous sweep of time or place. Charting just eight days in a squad's bid to take the French town of Carenton, and narrated by a dour monologue from the introspective lead character, Sgt Matt Baker, it seems a calm and narrow representation compared to typical videogame warfare, and is all the better for it.

The game's battlefields are just that – rural stretches of furrowed farmland and hushed towns – giving the game an air of disconcerting quiet which is reinforced by the open scope of the landscape. A lack of in-game music, too, only adds to this atmosphere, an atmosphere realised through absence of bustle and chaos. It means that when your squad does encounter enemy action, it feels all the more threatening and brutal for it, with each firefight becoming a set-piece. In fact, this seems to be exactly how Gearbox planned it – one of *Brothers In Arms*' most impressive features is Situational Awareness mode, where the game pauses and zooms out for an RTS-style view of the combat zone. This allows players to evaluate the situation, and dole out orders accordingly. While it may sound like a shame-faced crutch, it's actually a brilliant touch, giving the player foresight without having to reap the hindsight of many trial-and-error deaths, and meaning that the blame for any bungled offensives is left at the foot of the player, not the designer's.

The problem with *Brothers In Arms*' strategy, however, is that it begins to feel one-note all too quickly. Encounters are almost always about setting up suppressive fields of fire, and then finding a suitable flanking angle. It's like a hands-on, retro realisation of *Full Spectrum Warrior*, and its tactics can dull just as quickly. Nothing feels broken – giving orders is a slick and simple process, executed well by your squad members – but the sense of available tactics feels limited, if not flawed, and it's reinforced by the occasionally frustrating invisible wall or implausible barricade.

Still, *Brothers In Arms* is a smooth and well-realised war story, rendered in striking crispness, from the underpowered crack of its archaic rifles to the stark profile of a church against a countryside backdrop. Plenty of games have flourished around the slaughter, scale and destruction of war, but few have managed to realise a soldier's role and worth – disposable, vulnerable, pivotal – as well as this. **[7]**

Turret torrent



Thanks to *Brothers In Arms*' unsettlingly tranquil sense of isolation, the appearance of a tank is a fearsome and startling event. It's not necessarily bad news, as the thunderous machines are often on your side. Certain missions see a tank join your squad, and it's yours to command. It's both a rush and a relief to have such hefty support, and sending one in to clean out a barricade of enemy troops is a welcome option. A tank is so fundamental to your unit's strength that if it's destroyed, the mission is automatically failed.





The camera pull-back during Situational Awareness mode is impressive, but the views on offer are locked on to your objectives, allies and enemies, sometimes making it tricky to survey the environment as intricatel as you'd like. No matter, though – the require path for a successful flank is often obvious



Your soldiers will respond to movement orders with an alarming amount of common sense, in the sense that they can vanish from view, scattering instead of just huddling together at your requested cover point





It's not often that loading screens are worthy of note, but *BIA*'s scrolling montages of troop cutouts and other mission details are surprisingly stylish, and are typical of the game's flair for unobtrusive visual detail



The opening scenes introduce all the interstellar spectacle you would hope for. These moments, unfortunately, can be counted on one hand and are almost entirely in cinematics



STAR WARS REPUBLIC COMMANDO

FORMAT: PC, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: LUCASARTS PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E141, E146

As it readies the final chapter of Anakin Skywalker's precursive fall from grace, Star Wars itself has arguably fallen out of touch with the Force. Labouring into its sixth (or, strictly speaking, third) episode, the series stands accused of clouding its morals with politics, diluting its iconic characters and retreating to a grand, but tellingly artificial stage. If that's the case, then *Republic Commando* is a disheartening paradigm – its lack of integrity and flavour suggests a licence with waning authority over its products.

Though decorated with Wookies, Droidekas and the particulars of the Clone Wars, this tactical FPS feels more detached than any previous Star Wars title. Its campaign visits three familiar environments but is preceded, inconceivably, by no opening titles. No logo, no scroll, no galaxies far, far away – no attempt exists, it would seem, to establish that most fundamental connection. Blessed with neither the technical intricacy of the lightsabre nor the limitless capability of the Force, the game harvests firstperson components with little appreciation of their purpose or function. There's an obtrusive visor/HUD, a *Halo*-inspired arsenal and a recharging shield, all bereft of their vital strategy and balance.

Nonetheless, the core of the game still holds some potential. Charging you with the command of a four-man squad of Clone Trooper elites, *Commando*'s rudimentary system of squad assignment and tactics is reliably clear-cut. Features of the environment, when appropriate, can be used to exploit the sniper, grenade and anti-armour abilities of your team. Once positioned, squad members will concentrate fire at their nearest, or designated, target. From these basics a command system emerges which stands to be the game's saviour. Directed by a context-sensitive reticule, all tactical commands come via a single button press or hold. Advantageous positions are constructed so as to provide feasible cover and opportunity to both AI and the player, creating a combat arena where the duties of squad and commander are efficiently intertwined. Indeed, the game is at its best when you are downed and call for assistance, your squad rushing to your aid and drawing enemy fire.

Ultimately, though, at every juncture where the game should convert its potential, the design misfires. The neat control system is called upon only in a series of underdeveloped and torturously repetitive set pieces. Requiring the execution of deliberately obstructive splice or demolition commands (button presses often over a minute long), encounters feel needlessly protracted – born of a stubborn refusal to admit the game's fundamental lack of content. The layout of scenery predetermines your every gambit before enemies blithely meander into your squad's unlimited gunfire. With health stations practically omnipresent, the subsequent lack of difficulty suggests a game acutely aware of its potential for annoying the player. Fearfully treading an easy path, *Commando* emerges as that most dreaded of Star Wars packages – a lazy, comprehensive return to the Dark Side. **[5]**



The customary sniper rifle with multiple zoom modes – useful for dissecting stronger droids. In the hands of your squad, it can vanquish endless ranks of enemies within seconds







Incapacitated, but all is not lost thanks to a revival manoeuvre available to you and your teammates. Call for help and, thanks to some questionable AI, a clone trooper will run either to your aid or into enemy fire

Joint offensive



As an exercise in priority mismanagement, *Republic Commando*'s multiplayer mode is exemplary. So skeletal are its maps and features that, considering the underdeveloped singleplayer campaign, its very existence feels impossible to justify. Yes, it can be played by up to 16 players via splitscreen, System Link and Xbox Live, but reasons to do so prove elusive. Incorporation of the efficient squad mechanic of singleplayer could have produced a genuinely original experience; as is characteristic of the overall package, however, the opportunity is squandered.







Your visor has two alternative view modes – 'low light' and 'tactical'. The first gives night vision with an authentically gritty monochrome filter; the second is so modest in its attempt to provide a detailed overview of your squad that it's of practically no use



CATCH! TOUCH! YOSHI

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Don't be misled by the time lag: *Catch! Touch! Yoshi* is the DS's true launch game. It does for the machine what Mario did so well for the N64 and so unsatisfactorily for the DS itself: it builds on Nintendo's heritage with invention and imagination and tailors a new kind of play around a new kind of control.

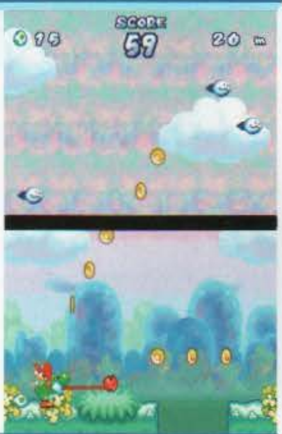
The main essence of the game is to protect Yoshi as he ferries Baby Mario on his eternal journey from left to right. The stylus is used to draw cloud platforms for him to run on, to poke him to make him jump and to tap out the trajectories of his eggs. Sweeping a cloud circle around an enemy traps him and turns him into a coin, which can then be dragged to Yoshi for consumption. As the game progresses, you become aware of subtle new possibilities. Empty bubbles can be used to nudge coins and enemies into place for impressive egg-shot combos. Clouds that hold you up can just as well be used to pen enemies in place. Bullets can be tapped out of the air, clumsy clusters of clouds blown out of existence with one powerful huff into the DS's microphone. It becomes an extended improvisation, a desperate, delighted juggle to correctly prioritise unexpected variables. It effortlessly preserves the kinetic slapstick of *Yoshi's Island* (see p108).

Also preserved is the SNES game's visual charisma. It may be little more than a fairly faithful homage to the original, but it's handled with much more sensitivity then the ham-fisted efforts of *Universal Gravititation*. However, it isn't nostalgia which fuels your progress through the game, it's enjoyment and amazement. There's a simple, unstoppable magic about firing an egg on the bottom screen and watching it arc into view on the other – a tactile joy in perfecting the angles as it ricochets up a narrow chimney in an arpeggio of pops.

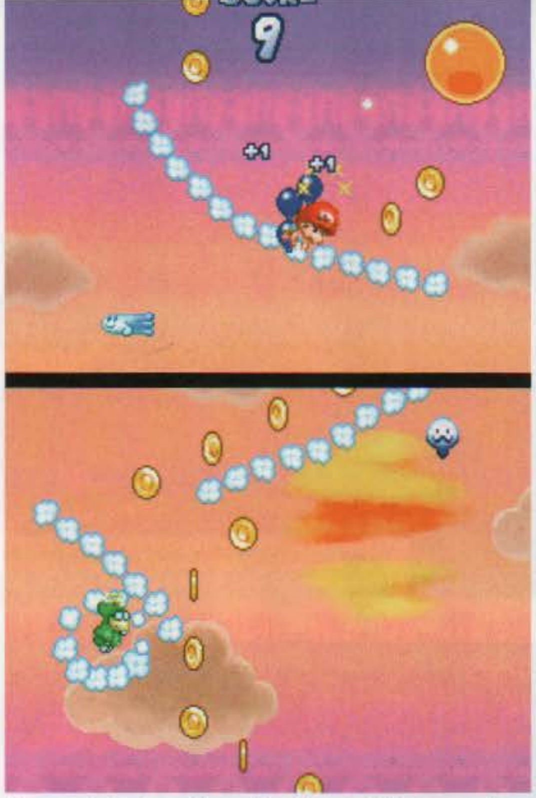
There's strategic satisfaction to be had, too. Level design, the fundamental artistry of any good platform game, becomes substantially irrelevant when you give the players the ability to draw their own. Instead, enemy design becomes the issue, and the familiar roster develops ever more devious abilities – bursting cloud platforms with spiked shells and burrowing to safety – which are ingenious and adaptable.

Added to this is a simple, but soundly devised twoplayer mode, beamable to any other DS. Here the two screens are put to perfect use, allowing you to monitor each other's progress as you trade chains of spiky mines, egging them from your screen to have them pop up on your opponent's. There may be downsides to *Catch! Touch!*'s clarity of vision – it certainly lacks the variety and sense of progress that great platform games can offer. But then it was never supposed to be a great platform game. It was supposed to be, and is, a great DS game. **[8]**

Long haul flights

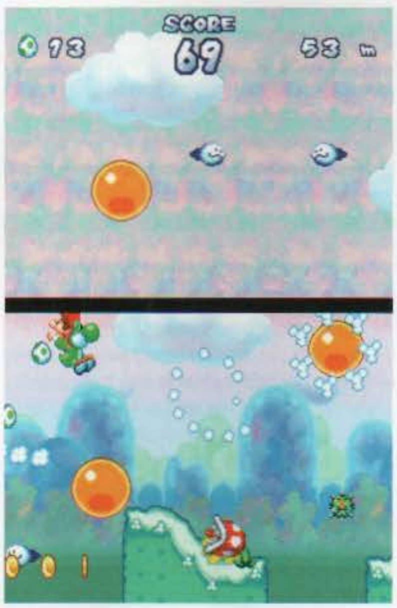


The first of *Catch! Touch!*'s play modes makes your heart sink. A simple coin-collecting challenge, it's over in five minutes or so. Happily, it works as a demo for the rest of the game, and despite the diversions of the boss-fighting time-trial mode, and the stressful survival challenges of a countdown mode, it's the straightforward distance Endless mode that is the real game. Yoshi's trek becomes an epic journey, as skies morph from apple dawn to midnight pinks and as level sections slot together in unpredictable patterns which, with the inclusion of random elements, ensures the game remains about quick thinking, not rote learning.





The more coins Mario can collect on his tumble to earth, the more eggs the trusty Yoshi waiting to catch up at the bottom can carry. Yoshi's sections are far longer, and so the game gives you a choice of restarting from the end of Mario's section



Moments like these are when the game requires the most improvisation. How will you save the day? Keep tapping Yoshi to hover him over everyone's heads, or tap out an egg barrage to take out enemies? Or draw in a high walkway to give you time to bubble those coins before they inch off screen?



Bubbles give the game a great deal of its subtely. Once loaded with coins, they must be flicked in the right direction to intercept Mario as he falls. Be wary, however, of the fact that the impact will shift his own trajectory



Firing eggs is a simple process of tapping in the direction you want them to go. Gauging the correct angle for extended top-screen combos is particularly satisfying



EA's 'Create-a' mode has brought a much greater level of flexibility to *Round 2*. Budding David Hayeses can take their character into a career or enter them into the overall roster



FIGHT NIGHT: ROUND 2

FORMAT: **GC, XBOX, PS2 (VERSION TESTED)** PRICE: **£40**
RELEASE: **MARCH 18** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (EA CHICAGO)**

In 1812's Boxiana, Pierce Egan described the 'sweet science of bruising' – a monicker that resurfaced during the 1950s and has defined, as an ideal, the sport of boxing ever since. A cynic would suggest that *Fight Night: Round 2* – a modern game by the world's biggest publisher – would likely be a paper champion, relegating the science in favour of the fireworks. It isn't. With a superior control system and a raft of incisive upgrades, this year's update is a connoisseur of the boxing arts.

Round 2's Career mode, like last time, has no story but is more than just a schedule of matches – it's a comprehensive, unforgiving lesson in boxing discipline. Its instruction is gold sealed with AI and mechanics that have reached to within inches of being absolutely convincing. CPU fighters adapt to every situation in accordance with their personality, round to round, moment to moment. Of the many upgrades, not one is counter-productive, instead capturing ever more of a dynamic that, last year, was partially achieved.

Punch power now ranges from the standard swipe to the jarring haymaker, all executed via a neat adjustment of the Total Punch Control system. A eulogy to this analogue punching mechanic could go on forever; the degree to which it transparently capacitates the player remains excellent. Cuts and swelling must now be managed between rounds, again controlled via interaction of the analogue sticks; a button-press, meanwhile, will clinch your opponent, providing a convenient means by which to escape an impending knockout or, if used without care, to get yourself disqualified from the fight.

Certainly, there's an uncompromising lack of immediacy to it all: training and progress can feel monotonous without appreciation of the drama that runs beneath the surface. In the strategic migration between weight divisions, meticulously influential stats and adjusted personalities lies a subtler path to compulsion. To its great credit, the game allows you – challenges you – to produce those classic, memorable bouts. Momentum will shift back and forth as strategies play out, 12th-round brawls will eke vital points from fatigued lunges, devastating sucker punches will flip a stalemate into a ten count and the crowd into turmoil. Rarely, if ever, has the 'it's in the game' edict of EA Sports been validated with quite this much conviction.

There could be more in terms of incidentals – at times the game feels more like an engine than a package, perhaps in need of more than its stockpile of unlockable garments and somewhat diminished special punches. It seems a shame to introduce novel features such as an upgradable entourage and then fall somewhat short of fleshing them out. But the fact remains that, mechanically speaking, the fight for the crown may already be won – an altogether fierce knockout in the second. **[8]**

The recovery procedure that confounded players last time is now simplified with icon indicators. Contrary to first impressions, this in no way detracts from the appeal

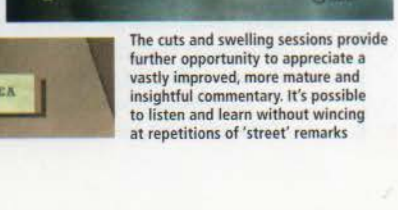






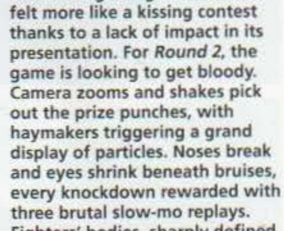
Hard Hits matches offer a spin on boxing tactics, awarding points only for knockdowns with rounds lasting as long as is required for one to occur. With 15 rounds in total, the fights seldom go the distance





The cuts and swelling sessions provide further opportunity to appreciate a vastly improved, more mature and insightful commentary. It's possible to listen and learn without wincing at repetitions of 'street' remarks

Spray of the exploding fist



The first *Fight Night* sometimes felt more like a kissing contest thanks to a lack of impact in its presentation. For *Round 2*, the game is looking to get bloody. Camera zooms and shakes pick out the prize punches, with haymakers triggering a grand display of particles. Noses break and eyes shrink beneath bruises, every knockdown rewarded with three brutal slow-mo replays. Fighters' bodies, sharply defined and crisply textured, fold and ripple as punches crash in, even leaving the floor if the right (or wrong) connection is made.



SWORDS OF DESTINY

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** ¥6,800 (£35) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JPN), SUMMER 2005 (UK) **PUBLISHER:** RISING STAR **DEVELOPER:** ARTOON

It's almost a relief to see Artoon not trying to break the mould, instead producing something without the suicidal ambition of *Blinx*. *Swords Of Destiny* is a flashy dash'n'slash scrapper, well-travelled ground that seems, initially, to be providing a firmer footing for Artoon's ideas.

Its main attraction is Sword Time, a showy and destructive mid-air combo that can be accessed by striking enemies at critical times. Your lock-on reticule briefly flashes red just before or after an enemy attack, allowing the player to cast all nearby enemies into the air for a vicious series of sword swipes. It's at its most enjoyable, surprisingly, during boss encounters, where it makes weak-spot exploitation feel far less cumbersome and humdrum than it usually does.

It's less satisfying, however, when facing groups of opponents, where things can swiftly feel dull and stuttered. It's the linking of attacks that's the problem, and there's no sensation of being able to gradually and skilfully build ever-slicker chains of hits. There's none of the magnificent grace to be found in *Bujingai*, or the hyperactive chaos of *Devil May Cry 3*. The inclusion of numerous blades to collect and upgrade does add a slight feeling of progression, but the action never seems to evolve into anything approaching epic.

Swords Of Destiny keeps its head up thanks to some nice touches – the softly epic soundtrack, and the effective camera tilting that takes place during dashes – but never really flowers into anything truly consuming. And, as such, the player never quite feels there's any scope for them to graduate beyond repeating the basics. **[5]**



The stages are moderately pretty, but it's the soundtrack that shines. Magical statues can only be destroyed during Sword Time, a task veering from the pleasing to the frustrating, depending on the nature of nearby enemies





There's an RPG aspect at work in *Swords Of Destiny*. Every enemy has its own experience level, meaning that the game can increase its difficulty without having to keep introducing new types of opponent. Ultimately this only adds to the average feel of the action



XENOSAGA EPISODE II: JENSEITS VON GUT UND BOSE

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** $40 (£21) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US; TBC UK) **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO **DEVELOPER:** MONOLITH SOFT









Battles earn skill points that can then be used to 'purchase' upgrades. In contrast to the first game, every skill upgrade is available to every character so responsibility for how to develop your team lies satisfyingly in the player's hands

"This is nothing more than a brush stroke in the larger picture." A quip from one of *Xenosaga 2*'s characters, though directed at a preceding 20-minute cut-scene, sums up all elements of this, part two of Tetsuya Takahashi's six-game interactive anime opus. Every facet of character, scenario, reference and camera angle is but a tiny nuance on the vision's sprawling canvas.

Xenosaga is the natural endgame for the FMV-driven RPG gaming that SquareSoft's PS1 output prophesied. The player is required to reap their principle enjoyment from the narrative and cinematic rather than the interactive. The traditional flow of play has been turned on its head: cut-scenes are the new king, gameplay elements little more than lines to link the drama; a space-opera *Shenmue* with the interaction and observation emphases swapped.

The *Xenosaga* world is both inordinately expansive and microcosmically detailed so it naturally demands a narrative to match. Takahashi does so with a tide of closely developed characters while continuing to scattergun frankly bizarre references ranging from Paul McCartney to the eponymous work of Nietzsche and on through to the Old Testament.

Improvements visually over the first *Xenosaga* game are evident: the cut-scenes are expertly directed and often genuinely impressive. The battle system has wisely been reworked, drawing more heavily on series prequel *Xenogears*' template, and the resulting boss fights can be fraught with real tension.

Xenosaga 2 is undoubtedly a labour of one man's love and vision. However, choosing to release episodic chapters on the videogame format is a fundamentally different design gambit to, say, George Lucas' development of Star Wars on film. Gaming is not a static format; neither is gameplay a static tenet. While this game is superior to the first *Xenosaga* title, in the two-year wait, videogame players have once again become wary of barely interactive narratives.

The episodic template that has been established is already a rod for its own back: if Monolith strays too far from the established format, the series will look incoherent and disjointed. But fail to adapt to changing times, tastes and a continually developing medium and the series will become outmoded and sidelined. *Xenosaga 2* already bears testament to the latter. If the series continues its current course, it will be eight years before episode six concludes. Perhaps the refinement over reinvention seen here will not be enough to see the canvas covered. **[6]**



Missions that do provide enemies en masse result in furious stand-offs, especially as turtling down under attack becomes less and less effective against stronger opponents



The original game's storyline provided little justification for your travels, and *RTA*'s dimension-hopping does so even less: the *EverQuest* licence seems a little irrelevant





CHAMPIONS: RETURN TO ARMS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), 18 MARCH (UK)
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: SNOWBLIND
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E146, E147

Snowblind could be a victim of its own success: *Dark Alliance* and its many descendants, including the developer's own *Champions Of Norrath*, have seen the console hack-and-slash market reach such a critical mass that producing the most polished of the bunch isn't necessarily enough.

That's not to say Snowblind has rested on its bump-mapped laurels with *Return To Arms*: not quite a sequel but more than an expansion, there are new character types, a new set of dungeons to crawl through with unlockable side-quests, and the promise of new items to spur on your massacring. You may have seen what the game's combat has to offer (perhaps across four titles now), but *RTA* seems almost desperate to silence critics of its simplicity by the introduction of every twist its designers can think of – escort quests, timed puzzles, collection sprees, an ill-advised stealth section. They're tolerable enough, but actually less entertaining than when the game drops the pretence to being anything other than a battle royale; nor can they change the game's fundamental, intentional lack of complication compared to the obsessive wheels within wheels of stat-tweaking champion *Diablo 2*.

But if *RTA*'s (and *Champions*' before it) weakness isn't that lack of depth, more of a case can be made against the lack of checks and counterbalances that characterised Blizzard's title. There's a feast-or-famine sensation pervading the game's currencies: skills veer from unfairly ineffective to wildly overpowered, and you're often either too poor to afford equipment from vendors or so rich that pricing becomes irrelevant.

Bosses, too, can either be defeated without breaking a sweat or will obliterate a party in a single attack, and the most effective strategy to combat them is invariably one player drawing the fire – with one finger on block and the other to constantly scull healing potions – and the others button-mashing from the rear. The bolstering of *RTA*'s new enemy types with heavily damaging chain attacks, charges and knockdowns is obviously intended to encourage more considered play, but in practice encourages lengthy hikes back to the nearest save point to resurrect fallen players, given how quickly and unpredictably the tide of battle can turn.

And yet it's that artificial tide that makes the multiplayer so compelling (and the singleplayer mode a strangely appealing grudge match): there's satisfaction to be found both in cutting down swathes of ineffectual foes and in triumphing over an encounter that's already cost you half a dozen just-one-more attempts.

Ironically, it's people who haven't played *Champions* rather than veterans who could find the most to like, given that it's a year's worth of tweaks and polish on that game's largely positive foundation. It's the cream of the crop that Snowblind planted, and no less entertaining as a chainmail-bikini-and-popcorn-thrills romp – but, at this stage, it is less of a revelation for it. **[6]**



Wizards receive one of the more appealing new skills in Battle Mage, allowing them to swap their wands for blades and throwing stars – but their low armour and hit points mean they're still a liability in combat





Spell effects remain spectacular, though there'll be few new arcane sights for returning *Champions* players, even in the supplemental skills given to the classic character types. Aura effects have in fact been toned down

Odd jobs



Most stages include optional 'medal rounds' – singleplayer minigames such as being tasked to escape from an undead-infested dungeon without armour or equipment, or defending a caravan against kobold raiders with an infinite supply of explosive potions. They're a little scattershot in appeal and difficulty, but some are more entertaining than they should have any right to be, and in addition to a Champion's Medallion for success you'll unlock an extra dungeon for party exploration.


YOSHI'S ISLAND

TIME EXTEND

SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHI'S ISLAND

FORMAT: **SNES**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **1995**

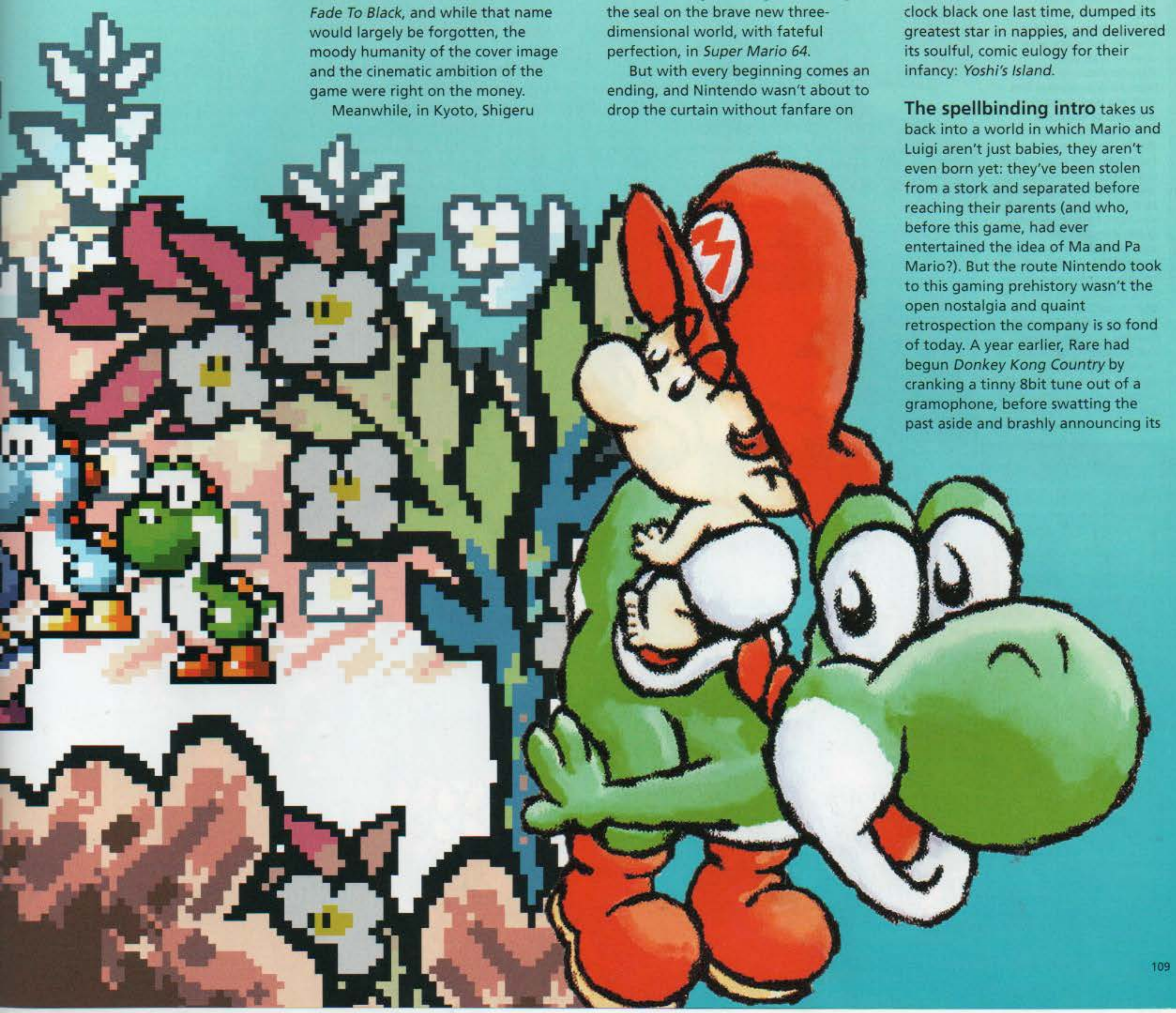
This is a story about Mario and Yoshi: about the birth of a legend and the end of an era

In late 1995, the rebirth of videogames was almost complete. Sony's PlayStation was already on shelves and under televisions in the UK, remoulding *Mario Kart*'s tartrazine fizz into the gunmetal-grey designer drug of *Wipeout* before amazed, dilated eyes. The 26th issue of **Edge** proclaimed that month's future of electronic entertainment to be '3D world beater' *Fade To Black*, and while that name would largely be forgotten, the moody humanity of the cover image and the cinematic ambition of the game were right on the money.

Meanwhile, in Kyoto, Shigeru Miyamoto's internal teams at Nintendo were at the very height of their powers. Their SNES work had been an unbroken hot streak, five years long and littered with masterpieces all the way back to *Super Mario World*. Now they were elbow-deep in revolution themselves, months away from completing what would be their most dizzying feat: simultaneously entering and setting the seal on the brave new three-dimensional world, with fateful perfection, in *Super Mario 64*.

But with every beginning comes an ending, and Nintendo wasn't about to drop the curtain without fanfare on an era it had ruled. Development of *Mario 64* had overlapped with another Mario sequel in EAD's labs, and it was the other that bore the title *Super Mario World 2*. It was the other that would be the last great Nintendo game on the SNES, the last great 2D platform game, and arguably the last great game of its generation. Videogames were growing up, but not before Nintendo had wound the clock black one last time, dumped its greatest star in nappies, and delivered its soulful, comic eulogy for their infancy: *Yoshi's Island*.

The spellbinding intro takes us back into a world in which Mario and Luigi aren't just babies, they aren't even born yet: they've been stolen from a stork and separated before reaching their parents (and who, before this game, had ever entertained the idea of Ma and Pa Mario?). But the route Nintendo took to this gaming prehistory wasn't the open nostalgia and quaint retrospection the company is so fond of today. A year earlier, Rare had begun *Donkey Kong Country* by cranking a tinny 8bit tune out of a gramophone, before swatting the past aside and brashly announcing its







EXIT STAGE LEFT/RIGHT

Most serious of the criticisms that can be levelled against *Yoshi's Island* – and there aren't many – is its total abandonment of the branching pathways and multiple level exits that unfurled in the more mysterious *Super Mario World*. Yoshi's progress from one level to the next is rigidly linear: you can go anywhere you like, so long as it's from left to right. It wouldn't be a Miyamoto game if levels weren't packed with secret byways and spatial puzzles, of course, but the promise of that enticing title screen – of one coherent space, ripe for exploration – is never fulfilled. It's frustrating, but infinitely preferable to the structure of the disappointing Nintendo 64 sequel *Yoshi's Story*, which was so loose as to be positively shapeless.



modernity with hip-hop beats and dazzling prerendered sprites that seemed strangely out of place on the 16bit hardware. *Yoshi's Island*, however, looked neither back at earlier gaming technology, nor forward to any kind of conventional future for it. Though it (almost literally) stretched the SNES to breaking point, it tried its hardest not to look like technology at all.

The Nintendo logo that introduces it is a wobbling scribble in pencil. A soft lullaby tinkles over the clockwork grinding of a music box that, cutely, has to be rewound halfway through the intro. The sunrise that blushes behind the flapping stork is so delicate it seems to have been done in watercolours, and the characters in this storybook drama might be from, well, a storybook. This carries convincingly through into the game proper, as Yoshi bears the infant Mario to his abducted brother through worlds that seem to have been conjured out of crayon and chalk, patchwork, paper and clay. The sprites look more like hand-drawn illustrations lined in thick ink. *Yoshi's Island* is a living, organic cartoon, made not of pixels or polygons, but of playroom detritus that has a texture so convincing you want to reach into the screen and touch it. The game's graphics aren't screaming 'now' but rather suggesting 'then': a pre-technological past, a daydreaming childhood, a story that begins 'a long, long time ago…'

This was a major step in a radical art style for games, an alternative goal to realism: the use of serious technical firepower to create the impression of something handmade. The thick outlines foreshadowed the primary technique in the development of 3D cel-shading, and the deliberately simplistic background dioramas were a precursor to the cardboard cutouts of pseudo-2D styles like *Viewtiful Joe*'s. It was an approach Nintendo would experiment with time and again with results as different (and stunning) as *Wind Waker*, *Paper Mario*, and even some of *Wario Ware*'s scrapbook schizophrenia. It was profoundly influential, and though at the time it lacked the immediate wow factor of the super-shiny *Donkey Kong Country*, it has aged far more gracefully.

These homespun visual stylings weren't the only task to which Miyamoto harnessed his artists' talent and his programmers' by-now-total command of the SNES. For *Yoshi's Island* was a technological marvel, making extravagant use of the Super FX chip in its cart. From the rippling logo to the ballooning bosses, absolutely everything in the game scales, spins, squashes, distorts, distends and warps. Jump on a rotund, blushing creature called a Milde and it squeezes flat for a moment before popping, satisfyingly, into nothingness, sending nearby





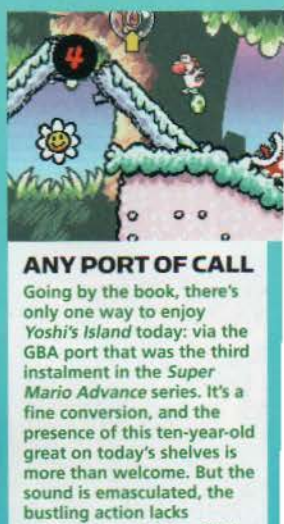
enemies tumbling with the force of the blast. Much bigger monsters made of translucent goo bounce, stretch, twist and quiver, furrowing their bushy eyebrows. Giant blocks of wood fall out of the screen, beams rotate, drums roll and boulders trundle with heavy momentum. The eggs Yoshi lays and throws ricochet like bullets, burrowing through soft earth, spinning pulleys to heft convincing weights for the little dinosaur to scamper underneath.

Mario games had for a long time been built around inertia and rebound, a strong physicality at the root of that peerless connection between player and avatar. But *Yoshi's Island* was, and is, on another level. Its whole world is as tactile and elastic as a warm lump of Plasticine, as energetic as a rubber ball, as startlingly three-dimensional as a pop-up book. It is gloriously, intoxicatingly physical. And it's not just in the lavish effects, or the surprisingly convincing physics. Tiny details of sound and animation – splattering mud, snow brushed off trees, the fat pop of a laid egg, the frantic, feather-scattering flap of a Goonie trying to support Yoshi's weight – are just as vital in helping this playground paradise defy its well-worn idiom of lava and ice to become tangible, responsive and real.

If there's a defining moment in *Yoshi's Island*, it comes toward the end of the first world: after you've defeated Burt The Bashful by throwing eggs at him until his pants fall off and he explodes out of sheer embarrassment, but before you've shaved Salvo The Slime's gelatinous body down to a tiny dollop that can no longer accommodate his blinking eyes. In a level called Touch Fuzzy Get Dizzy, an unremarkable woodland stroll is interrupted when the screen floods with hairy, puffy white balls like obese dandelion seeds, wafting gently on the breeze. Touching one makes Yoshi 'dizzy' – but really this is just the game's kindergarten euphemism for blind drunk. He goes cross-eyed, colours pulse and shift, the music squawks queasily, and the entire landscape begins to undulate in heavy, seasick rolls. In a beautifully literal, physical interpretation of a mental state, the teetering dinosaur plunges helplessly into the troughs and labours up to the crests of these waves in a stagger that's just the right side of impossible to control. It's not a difficult section, but it takes a while because you're too busy hooting with laughter to prevent Yoshi's headlong tumble from one Fuzzy into the next (as if you'd want to).

This is where the game's living landscape, its hero's irrepressible momentum and its bewilderingly imaginative bestiary meet. Together, they create spontaneous, physical comedy that has never been bettered in games. It's unapologetically low comedy of course, the kind of violent and absurd Tom & Jerry slapstick beloved of children and animators everywhere, but it is unusually native to the game. Whereas other classics of videogame humour (*Monkey Island*, say) have jokes written in to them, the best jokes in *Yoshi's Island* issue directly from the gameplay, and involve the player. The designers set them up, seeding the world with carefully-timed comic possibilities – a monkey spitting melon seeds here, a trough of slippery mud here, a balloon carrying a Shy Guy with a bomb – but it's always your fingers that deliver the punchline. That's

Whereas other classics of videogame humour have jokes written in to them, the best jokes in Yoshi's Island issue directly from the gameplay and involve the player



ANY PORT OF CALL

Going by the book, there's only one way to enjoy *Yoshi's Island* today: via the GBA port that was the third instalment in the *Super Mario Advance* series. It's a fine conversion, and the presence of this ten-year-old great on today's shelves is more than welcome. But the sound is emasculated, the bustling action lacks smoothness, and the GBA's colour palette is too thin to reproduce the original's incredibly warm, rich tones; it's like a remastered CD reissue of a favourite slab of vinyl: faithful, enjoyable, but just not the same. There are shadier channels through which the game can be obtained and played, of course, but even some current emulation software struggles a little with its festival of Super FX. No wonder the original SNES carts are so sought-after – they're still by far the best passport to this island paradise.









Are Harry Hedgehog's blue spikes and fast pace a sly nod to a rival series? Like all the inhabitants of *Yoshi's Island*, he is so sweetly in tune with his surroundings you almost believe it's a coincidence

what makes it one of the purest, most native expressions of comedy in the videogame form.

These are jokes, however, that you couldn't pull off on your own; you need help from your enemies, but 'enemies' often seems an inappropriate word. Not for those Bandits, it's true, or the Lakitus who pelt Yoshi from clouds or holes in the wall, or the ever-hateful, gnashing piranha plants. But the cheerful monkeys that scamper around Yoshi throughout world three, coyly playing catch-me-if-you-can, swinging in chains from the treetops, or engaging the dinosaur in seed-spitting firefights, seem more like mischievous playmates overstepping the mark. The wide-eyed Flightless Goonies, running in terrified streams and rolling in fat stupor along the ground, are no more malevolent than the little vacant penguins that bounce Yoshi around the game's later snowscapes: they're just pratfalls waiting to happen. The weeble-like Burts might be trying to get Yoshi as they leap ridiculously off each other's heads, or they might just be practising some inept, clownish acrobatics. Each new creature is encountered not with fear, but joy and curiosity, compelling the player to jump on it, stomp it, shoot it, eat it and spit it out until every quacking sound effect and comic permutation of cause and effect has been discovered.

There's a subtle innocence to everything about *Yoshi's Island*, and it runs deeper than the game's whimsical presentation. Take the most common bad guys: the Shy Guys. Caped from head to toe, and wearing expressionless open-mouthed masks as haunting as they are cute, the Shy Guys come at Yoshi in wildly varied and hilariously undignified fashion: somersaulting, dangling from head-propellers, gingerly picking their way on stilts, or even hiding under sheets and pretending to be ghosts. Some are grotesquely fat, and when eaten, cause Yoshi to lay giant egg-bombs that can barely be thrown. Some are tall and thin, their elongated masks scarily resembling Munch's Scream. Their patterns are preset, their attacks half-hearted, and they seem to have no will or malicious intent of their own. They're funny, but also a little sad: their attempts to assault Yoshi so hopeless and ridiculous, it's almost cruel. With the Shy Guy, the game's genial exuberance tips lightly into pathos, as it does with the bosses. These aren't ferocious, fully grown terrors: they aren't bosses at all, each one being no more than a common-or-garden variety of the island's surreal fauna, enlarged by the wizard koopa Kamek to outrageous size, but mindless and blameless in its fate. This makes them the perfect opponents for the faithful, dog-like dinosaur and his young charge, because it ensures that from hero to ultimate enemy – excepting Kamek, who rarely acts directly – *Yoshi's Island* is a world entirely without adults, complete in its innocence. Fittingly, the final battle starts as a toddler's brawl, with a baby Bowser jealous of Mario's mount, stomping furiously and crying "MINE! MINE" as he tries to snatch a ride on the "green donkey".

Each creature is encountered with joy and curiosity, compelling the player to jump on it, stomp it, shoot it, eat it and spit it out until every comic permutation has been discovered

The most touching twist on this world of eternal childhood is in the hero himself, or rather the heroes





The beginning of a stage is the best place to admire the view. The warm palette and freeform style are richly atmospheric, and give a strong sense of place, season, and time of day









Even the island's most fearsome monsters have a vulnerable side. The ravenous Shark Chomp weeps when it cracks its teeth on hard stone, while Sluggy The Unshaven can only be defeated by, literally, breaking his heart



themselves. For what could be more infantile than Yoshi, with his digestive impulse to put things in his mouth and either throw them straight back up or pass them, mysteriously, out of his backside? The answer, of course, is an actual infant, a being whose powerlessness and trust are absolutely complete, who cries in terror at the slightest loss of contact with his guardian. Yoshi is a child put in charge of a child, and the key mechanical feature of this game is also its emotional core: being struck means not death for the dinosaur but peril for the baby, as he's knocked off Yoshi's back, and floats away in a bubble. There are few things in games as heart-rendingly stressful as those panicked moments, scrambling to reclaim the baby against a ticking clock, impelled by his enervating, desperate cries. The threat is displaced from the avatar to his helpless cargo, and the childish, enthusiastic beast becomes a parent: responsible, harried and defensive of his charge.

It's a primal motivation, more instinctive and more profound than the romantic heroism that drives a lone, fearless Mario to save his damsel in distress. And perhaps it gives extra contextual poignancy to a game that was the last two-dimensional gasp of the greatest platform series. In giving the player care of Mario – and by extension, the captured Luigi – before the event of their birth, Miyamoto entrusts the player with the very existence of his creations. If Yoshi were to fail, none of Mario's adventures would ever take place, and a beloved icon would wink out of existence. Of course, such a failure is an impossible paradox, and the game's final frame shows Mario and Luigi held aloft by their parents over the legend 'Heroes Are Born!' In retrospect, it's sad to realise that Mario's adventures, in their original form, may have died at that moment of his birth. But if they did end there, they did so after their most idyllic and loving episode, mourned by a joyful tear, and celebrated by the widest of smiles.

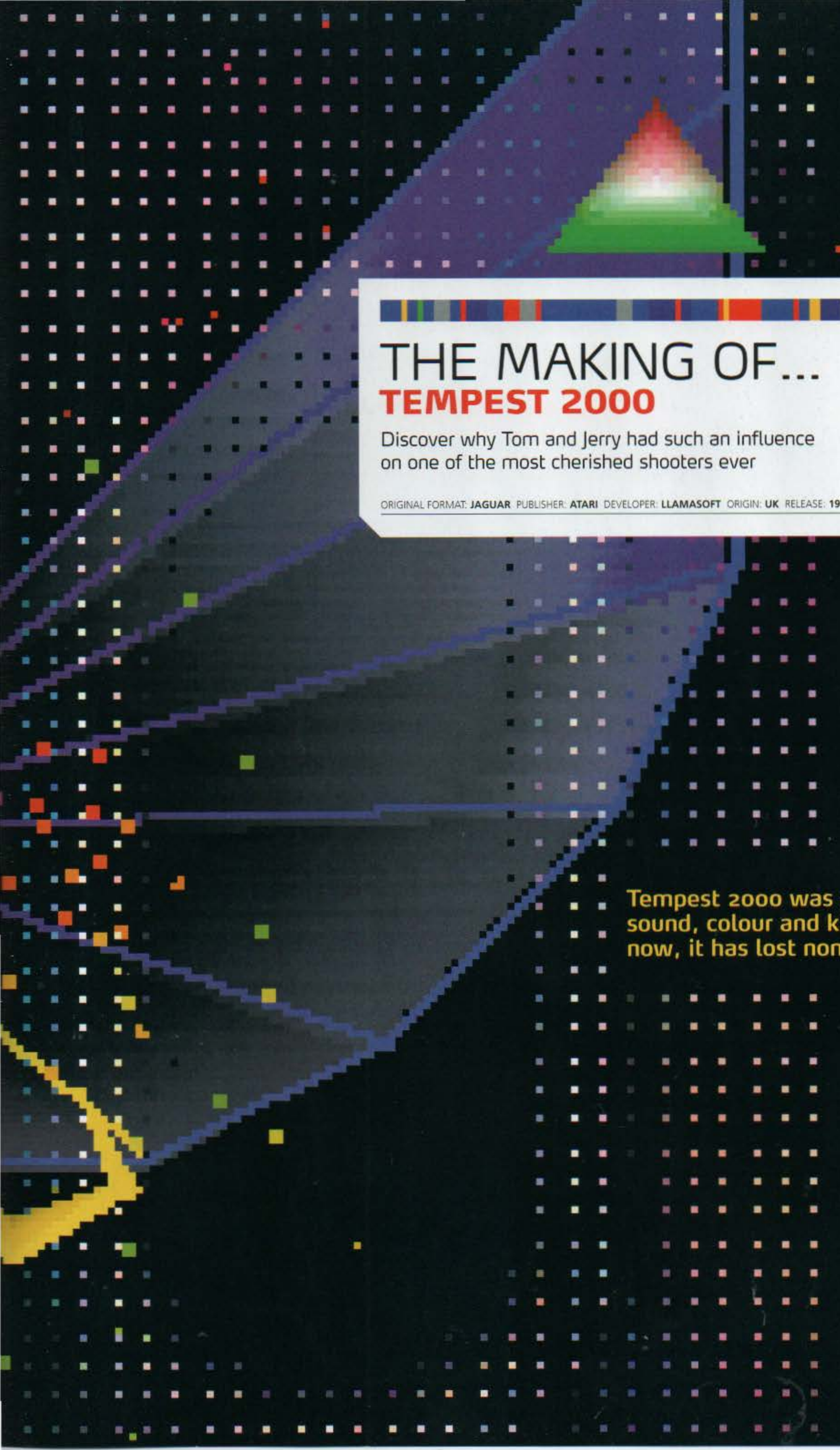


THE COMEBACK TRAIL

Ever since Yoshi's first appearance in *Super Mario World*, and with the glaring exception of *Yoshi's Island*, Nintendo has struggled to furnish the cute creature with his own gaming identity. *Yoshi's Cookie* and *Safari* were meaningless endorsements; the same can be said of Intelligent Systems' misleadingly titled puzzler *Tetris Attack* (below), though that at least was a terrific game, and graced by *Island*'s delightful character art. *Yoshi's Story* appointed him the saviour of the 2D platform game, but even if it wasn't already dead, the genre wouldn't have survived this unfortunate misconception. Left languishing on the celebrity golf and after-dinner entertainment circuit for years, it wasn't until his supporting role in *Mario Sunshine* that Yoshi's rehabilitation as a platform star began. Now with *Universal Gravitation* and *Catch! Touch! Yoshi!* he has at last found a niche – in physically innovative, intuitive platform games – that suits him well and recalls his finest hour.




64776
DUDE



THE MAKING OF... TEMPEST 2000

Discover why Tom and Jerry had such an influence on one of the most cherished shooters ever

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **JAGUAR** PUBLISHER: **ATARI** DEVELOPER: **LLAMASOFT** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **1994**

Unforgivably labelled a curio by some, *Tempest 2000* is often cherished for the wrong reason – namely that it's one of the few decent Atari Jaguar titles. To own the game is a kind of badge of honour among archivists, but how many have bought the game only to tuck it away until it realises higher prices in the future? Played in its day, *Tempest 2000* was a prismatic whirligig of sound, colour and kinetic destruction. Played now, it has lost none of its mesmeric charms or raw spirit.

Tempest 2000 was a prismatic whirligig of sound, colour and kinetic destruction. Played now, it has lost none of its mesmeric charms

Indie coder **Jeff Minter** was given the task of converting Dave Thuerer's 1981 arcade classic to Atari's new console. With the benefit of hindsight it was a perfect match, but the original deal was struck in a ludicrously casual manner. "I'd been doing some work for Atari UK," explains Minter, "stuff like *Defender II* and *Atomic Tadpoles Vs Savage Mutant Weirdos From Basingstoke* [released as *Photon Storm*], and I'd already done a couple of months' work on the Panther system that never got released. Anyway, Atari held a devcon to introduce the Jaguar system in one of those hotels near Heathrow Airport and



A DAY IN THE LIFE

During the development of *Tempest 2000*, Minter would typically wake up in the morning, smoke cigarettes, drink tea (at least two cups), read the newspaper, then feed his sheep before sitting down at his workstation. Coding would usually go on until 10pm, when he would embark to the local pub. In the latter stages, however, the routine altered somewhat to allow for an unusual QA process: "The daughter of the landlord of the pub used to frequently visit in the afternoons. At first for SNES *Street Fighter II* sessions – she was Chun-Li and I was Blanka – and as things progressed with *Tempest*, as an unofficial gameplay tester. Her sister had done pretty much the same thing during the development of *Llamatron*."

during the course of the devcon we were all told about the Jaggy and shown some demos, most notably the rotating cube with a jaguar on. In due course they announced a list of titles to which they owned the rights and for which they were looking for people to convert. *Tempest* came up and I stuck my hand up and said I'd like to do it. I'd never done any 3D at that point and never so much as touched a polygon."

Minter's working relationship with Atari was a joyful one as he was given free reign over the creative content and mechanics of the game, only nudged in certain directions when he "got too crazy with the pixel-shattering bonuses." *Tempest 2000*'s balance was exquisite, with a novel save key feature allowing players to get stuck in to the later levels without having to go through the whole game again. Maintaining the integrity of the original was paramount, and though a 'traditional' version was selectable from the main menu it was the addition of new enemies that brought a freshness and variety to the experience.

"I wanted enemies as distinctive and fearful in their own way as the Fuseballs and Pulsars were in the original game," says Minter. "Pulsars in particular make you change the way you play the game when they appear – you can no longer just run around the rim of the web with impunity, you have to time your motions and attacks. The idea with Mirrors and Demon Heads was to break up the flow of play in a similar way – with Mirrors around you couldn't just 'fire and forget', you had to nip smartly out of the way to avoid the reflection of your own shots. And the Demon Heads would throw their horns at you, and the horns couldn't be destroyed, so you had to shoot, avoid horn, shoot again, avoid horn, then shoot once more to kill. I wanted to introduce things that would force players to change their playing style as the levels evolved."

Visually, *Tempest 2000* was a bewitching kaleidoscope of shapes, colours and hardware effects. Webs would whirl out of space in vermilion and blue, and soon swarmed with strange malignant enemies: Spikers, Fuseballs, Pulsars, Flippers, Tankers. Theurer once said of his creation that it came to him in a dream, a dark hole out of which crawled nightmare creatures. Minter's interpretation was no less surreal. It's tempting to get carried away, go overly psychoanalytical, but there's no question *Tempest* appeals to a primal part in all of us: the need to protect and defend. Other games introduced similar themes, but *Tempest 2000*, with its beguiling geometry and cacophonous sound effects, went deeper, sketching out the inner turmoil of a psyche under attack from an unremitting, uncaring force.

Moving from the stark vectors of the original to Gouraud-shaded polygons was the biggest challenge, but Minter found Atari's new console surprisingly versatile. "The Jag hardware was cool to work with – you had the 68K, of course, but much of the interesting coding was done on the two RISC coprocessors, Tom and Jerry," he recalls. "Most of my work was on Tom, Jerry being the domain of the audio programmers. You also had a versatile blitter that you could coax into doing interesting stuff.

It's tempting to get carried away, go overly psychoanalytical, but there's no question Tempest appeals to a primal part in all of us

One of the hardware designers later told me off for running the chip 'backwards'. I used address generators meant for traversing textures internally for texture mapping for writing to the screen instead – in order to create the shattering of bitmaps used a lot in the game. It was a more complex beast than I'd programmed before and I enjoyed getting to grips with it, and also enjoyed the opportunity to learn some very







Some of the more trippy feedback effects were created when Minter fed an entire previous frame into his own sprite scale-and-rotate code. It was christened Melt-O-Vision, but the sluggishness meant that it could only be used effectively on the game over and menu screens



basic 3D skills and how to draw polygons from first principles. Even today it still feels a bit like cheating the way you simply ask for a textured triangle and, lo and behold, it appears."

Minter's penchant for psychedelic visuals and trippy audio had already been established with games like *Attack Of The Mutant Camels*, but *Tempest 2000* took it further: "The audio guys were simply great. All I did was send them a videotape of me playing *T2K* with the kind of music that I enjoyed playing the game to. A fair bit came from a compilation of industrial/techno stuff called Below San Onofre that one of the guys at Atari had given me because his band featured on it. The bands had names like Sweat Engine and Tit Wrench, and a few weeks later they came up with those awesome tunes. At first they sent me an audio tape and I remember listening to it in my kitchen and thinking that the demo tunes they'd sent must have been made on proper synths and that the tunes on the Jag wouldn't sound nearly as good. But then they sent me the audio code and I dropped it into the game – it sounded every bit as excellent as the demo tapes. I was well happy with it."

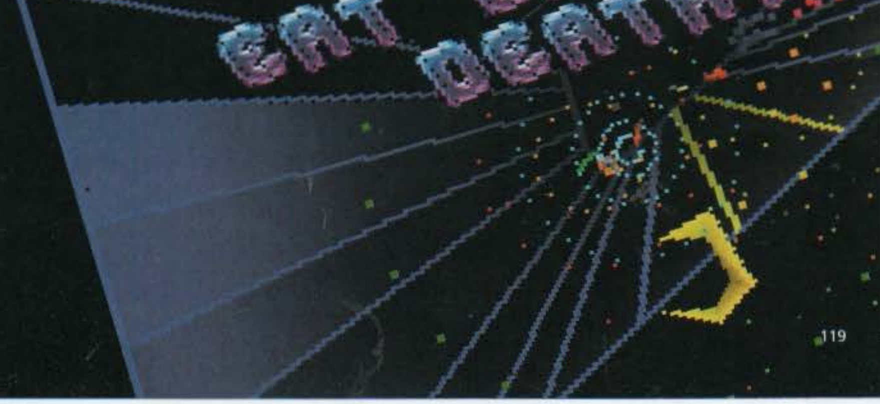
A great deal of *Tempest 2000*'s charm – and it's here where the game differed most obviously to the original – was down to the warp bonus rounds. Replacing the pumping techno and screeching death throes of Spikers with chilled-out tunes was a stroke of genius adding contrast to a game that might otherwise have overloaded the senses. These tranquil breathers were reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's spellbinding infinity effects from 2001: A Space Odyssey, albeit interpreted for a console, and could only be accessed by collecting three warp power-ups. The warp bonus rounds also gave players the opportunity to bag up to 20,000 points and jump five levels ahead.

It's hard to imagine the game getting anything but praise from both publisher and public alike, but *Tempest 2000* wasn't always considered the jewel in the Jaguar's crown. "I was gobsmacked at its popularity because I'd had a knock-back at the Jaguar launch in New York," remembers Minter. "During a drunken talk with one of the Jaguar designers he'd been quite scathing about the then-unfinished *T2K*, saying that it didn't make good use of the hardware. He said Atari considered it to be nothing but a 'makeweight' title at best compared to the likes of *Trevor McFur In The Crescent Galaxy*. Of course, a lot more of the game was completed after that, but nonetheless I really thought my game would pretty much be the worst of the [launch titles] and worried whether it would even be considered good enough for release. When people came back from CES just after I arrived and started telling me it had got an award as one of the best games at the show I was rather relieved."

Though *Tempest 2000* received glowing reviews in the gaming press it did little to boost sales of the Jaguar which struggled to compete with both the SNES and Mega Drive, both of which boasted far larger software libraries. Minter remains philosophical about the game failing to reach a wider audience (his Nuon version, *Tempest 3000*, would later suffer a similar fate) but is delighted that the Project Tempest emulator (http://pt.emuunlim.com/) is keeping the game alive for those who don't have space for another old console in their collection.

Yes, curio is a demeaning label for a game that can still hold its own next to any modern shooter. But as a paean to an extinct arcade era and a gift to rapid-fire enthusiasts everywhere, Minter believes there may be life in the series yet. "Imagine an updated *Tempest* on the PSP..." is all he'll say. We're imagining. We're imagining.







Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: SONY STUDIO LIVERPOOL

DATE FOUNDED: 1984

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 92

HEAD OF STUDIO: Clemens Wangerin



URL: www.playstation.com or www.wipeoutpure.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Wipeout series (1995 to date; PS1, PS2 and PSP), *Colony Wars* series (1997-1998; PS1), *Formula One* series (2001 to date; PS2)

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:
Delivering global hits, pioneering technologies, cutting-edge visuals and efficient production methods



wipEout pure



Wipeout Pure **is Studio Liverpool's first PSP title, while** ***F1 '04*** **(top) is the latest in a lengthy series**



UK LOCATIONS:
Liverpool

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Wipeout Pure (PSP)
F1 '05 (PS2)

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Studio Liverpool is one of three of Sony Computer Entertainment's internal PD Studios in the UK.

"There are currently two titles in development – *Wipeout Pure* for PSP will launch in Europe simultaneously with the hardware (as it will in the US, courtesy of SCEA) and will be released in Japan around April by SCEJ. The latest instalment in the *F1* series – *F1 '05* for PS2; developed under an exclusive licence agreement – is on track to be released across Europe in June and will be published in Japan later this year.

"In addition to the project teams, the studio also houses a Tools And Technology group that lends invaluable support to the PD teams and a very talented CG Render group with a team of graphic designers, whose contributions to *Wipeout Pure* can be seen in-game, on the front cover of this magazine and on the game's website. There is also a professional video production department on site that does work for most SCEE-published titles and has produced some groundbreaking 'making of' features for hits like *Killzone* and *The Getaway*.

"Being part of a great organisation such as Sony Computer Entertainment has many advantages – not least of which are long-term stability, excellent benefits, great facilities, substantial marketing support and a mandate to break new ground and lead from the front at all times.

"With advantages like that, the studio is focused on making the most of them at all times. There is no kudos gained from resting on past achievements, only from attaining new ones. With the full backing of its parent company, Studio Liverpool is pioneering new solutions that become must-have feature-sets for other games. Like the groundbreaking download system of *Wipeout Pure* that seamlessly integrates new content like tracks and music from the website into the game.

"Releasing seven best-selling titles over the course of five years requires a strong emphasis on good organisation, great communication, solid production methodology and versatile production tools. In the end, though, it's the highly skilled and talented people within the studio from countries like the UK, Germany, Italy, Canada, Ireland, Australia and Italy that make it all happen and who every day push our boundaries of gaming into new territory."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

The hard Cell

The Cell, created by Sony, Toshiba and IBM, is a marvel of chip design, but its complexity is creating issues for development tool companies



Andrew Richards, MD, Codeplay

www.snsys.com
www.codeplay.com



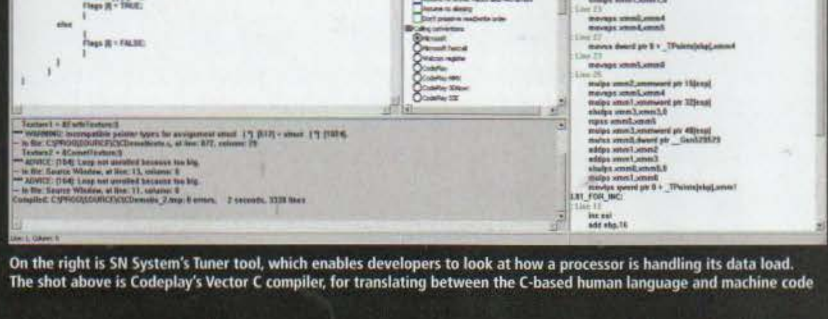
Martin Day, director, SN Systems

It may only be one element of Sony's next piece of gaming hardware, but the much-vaunted Cell CPU is certainly the most important and expensive component. Yet as more details about its revolutionary architecture were revealed at the International Solid State Circuits Conference in San Francisco (mainly at partner IBM's insistence, it's believed), so it has become clearer what a paradigm shift the chip will herald for developers.

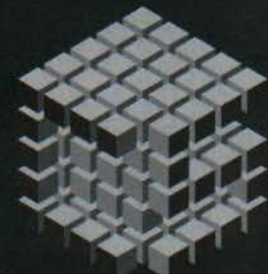
Changing the emphasis from increasingly complex single cores, characterised by Intel's Pentium family, the Cell simplifies processor architecture by breaking the system down to one not-very-complex core supported by numerous fast and simple coprocessors. But the most pressing concern is this: how on earth do you go about programming such a multi-core beast?

The problem arises as each Cell consists of a single 64bit Power processor core (the easy bit) which is connected to eight coprocessors, which Sony archly refers to as Synergistic Processing Units (SPU). In some ways, this is broadly similar to PlayStation2, which infamously had a processor and two coprocessors, called Vector Units (VUs). However, one of the VUs was connected directly to the CPU with the other one connected to the graphics chip. This meant each was suited to specific tasks – the CPU-focused VU being great for physics, for example – so developers had to carefully consider how to use them. The fear is that the flexibility provided by eight coprocessors, each of which is connected to the core via the same ultrafast bus, could prove debilitating. Even in the case of PlayStation2, many developers of first and second generation games chose to use the VUs as little as possible, such was their lack of experience. With the Cell, though, employing such a shallow learning curve will not be an option, as the advantages offered by parallel processing are its very raison d'etre.

One man trying to solve this is **Andrew Richards**. Founder of Edinburgh-based Codeplay, a game programming tools company, he's just been awarded a research grant to work



On the right is SN System's Tuner tool, which enables developers to look at how a processor is handling its data load. The shot above is Codeplay's Vector C compiler, for translating between the C-based human language and machine code



out the most efficient way of running software across multiple processors. The key issue, he explains, is timing: "The problem is that programs have to be split up into sections which can be executed at the same time on different processors and then the results joined back together. This means you have to be able to synchronise and combine these different bits of processing. It's easy to introduce bugs that occur due to unpredictable timing."

Such unpredictability also means it's hard to debug a piece of code once it's written. "The flexibility of the setup means it can be almost impossible to repeat any problem you've experienced, in order to see why it happened and how you should fix it," says Richards.

Another company squaring up to the coming challenge is Bristol-based SN Systems. A world leader in game programming tools, it has developed Window-based utilities for the past two generations of Sony consoles. Co-director **Martin Day** says he's looking forward to getting to grips with the Cell, but warns that some fundamental issues need to be overcome. "Multiple cores are a big deal, particularly in terms of knowing how many processors are idle and waiting for others to finish their tasks," he says. "Certainly, from our point of view, the major challenge will be creating performance-measuring tools so we can give programmers an idea of how much of the machine's potential they are using."

One area Day reckons is ripe for research in this context is that of compilers. For utilities which convert human-readable languages such as C++ into something a computer can process, the flexibility provided by multi-core architectures poses significant issues. "The simplest solution would be to have one compiler for the main processor and a different one for the coprocessors, which is the approach we used for PlayStation2," he says. "What would be much better would be having one compiler that works for both types of processors." In this way, the programmer would be able to tell Cell to use, say, four SPUs to handle a complex graphics task and the compiler would build the code to enable it to happen.

There are other approaches, but Day says they are currently in the realm of blue sky research. "Ideally what you'd want is a compiler that would analyse what it needed to process and the resources it had available and would be able divide up the task automatically," he muses. "You could even get feedback from profiling tools, such as how often certain loops are running and what proportion of a game frame is being taken up by a particular piece of code, and then feed it back so the compiler could rebuild the code for maximum efficiency."

Such elegance remains way off, with most programmers just worrying about how they will get their first Cell-processed polygon onscreen. Yet perhaps the biggest surprise is still to come. Although the basic configuration of Cell has been announced, Sony remains tight lipped about how many will be used in each of its next consoles. Programming two or more Cells? Now that would be a real challenge.



Anatomy of a Cell

At its core, the Cell chip consists of a dual-threaded 64bit Power processor with a VMX/AltiVec vector unit supported by 512Kb of L2 cache memory. This is connected to eight Synergistic Processing Units, each of which consists of 128x128bit registers with 256Kb of memory. The resulting 234-million transistor processor, boasting 2.5Mb of on-chip memory, is thus a ten-way coherent threaded machine. It is capable of supporting multiple operating systems simultaneously, including Linux.

Designed and manufactured thanks to the three-way strategic agreement between Sony, Toshiba and IBM, it's already cost them over $2 billion. Production silicon from the three 90-nanometer fabrication plants at East Fishkill NY (IBM), Oita (Toshiba) and Nagasaki (Sony) won't to be available until the middle of the year and the planned full-scale output of 15,000 wafers a month will take further months to come online. As well as Sony's consoles, the Cell will be used in high-definition TVs from Toshiba, while IBM has announced that it will create highend Cell workstations for film and other digital content creation tasks.



If the Cell will be a challenge for game developers, it's already taxing developers such as SN Systems and Codeplay, who create the low-level tools used by middleware companies and the first wave developers of console launch titles



This is what's causing all the headaches. No, not IBM analysis engineer Tami Vogel but the small piece of silicon she's holding. With an area of $221mm^2$ and consisting of 234 million transistors, Cell is the most powerful CPU designed for desktop and entertainment applications



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

The rules of thumbs

One of the best things about playing games in virtual space is the convenience of not needing the time and physical space to set up enormous and complicated toysets. There's also the fact that there's no need to define formal challenges or to monitor play, which means more freedom to enjoy play. These days, playing patience with real cards feels antiquated and laborious, even with the scope to cheat reinstated.

Rules in computer and videogames aren't made to be broken – not often, not formally, anyway. But what if the rules of play are made malleable, interpretable: 'soft rules'?

In tag, whether someone's been tagged is open to interpretation – and that adds spice. This manifests to great effect (and has seldom been bettered) in the original *Pac-Man*: the fact a ghost just touches Pac-Man isn't considered contact enough – a ghost has to be almost on top of him before he's tagged (well, touching a central point). The illusion of a soft rule makes play more tense and players feel 'jammy'.

Typically, thousands of hard rules are defined during the development process. Natural rules underpin a microcosm for the purpose of play and games (and tend to include interpretations of the laws of physics). Natural or supernatural rules, depending on appropriateness, determine how toys enter play, perform in play and leave play (effectively birth, life and death performances). Supernatural rules tend to govern how players play – how they manipulate toys and to what end. Adequately conveying enough of these rules to players is often more work than defining them – and much easier when the setting is more obviously mundane than abstract.

> "Natural or supernatural rules, depending on appropriateness, determine how toys enter play, perform in play and leave play"

Computer software programs rather than distinctive embodiments maintain the rules. Unlike the rules in real games, which are almost always subject to more tangible direction and adjudication in the form of referees, dungeon masters and the like. The fact that a human element manages the rules is what makes many sports interesting and involving for many.

How would you react to a 'bad call' in a virtual sport? (Assuming the author provides appropriate support for you to express yourself... you can hardly attack an umpire when control over your action figure is suspended and there are no rules governing racquet and umpire interaction, so repeated blows to his skull simply aren't recognised.) There's no doubting it would take you by surprise the first time – if you even noticed that, say, the ball was in fact in and not out. But would the uncertainty ruin or enliven play?

Referees have the power to introduce and remove toys from play, start and stop play. They keep track of time and note what you do, when you do it, for how long, how often and how well. They decide what attention to pay to you and for how long – determine what rewards and punishments are appropriate. Referees mainly manifest through ceremonies. Referees in virtual play are usually omniscient and omnipresent with no audible, visible or tactile presence or obvious personality. Even though people make them what they are and bias their structure, these referees are at least impartial.

Play might be all the more entertaining if referees did have clear-cut qualities. Referees monitoring play constantly, regularly or irregularly can be exploited. Referees influence by mood might take a shine to the way you pla so you get away with murder. Short-sighted referees, likely to miss incidents at a distance, can be used to your advantage.

You could be given the chance to obscure th referee's senses or even remove the referee altogether. In Geoff Crammond's still unparalleled *The Sentinel*, the eponymous bein and its minions tend to act as referee and linesmen, upholding the laws of energy distribution in the playscape. You find yourself avoiding their senses with the aim of removing their rule and rules from play.

The civilians and law enforcement in the likes of *GTA* represent fragmented referees. Rules are only considered broken when there are witnesses. But the enforcement of the rules isn't instantaneous and absolute – you have to be caught by the long arm of the law before you can be punished. It's similar to contesting the referee's judgement in a sport, although there's no chance of reversing the call. Is there much satisfaction to be had taking on the sole role of referee, not following or making the rules but overseeing them, watching players (real or artificial) play a game and providing guidance? *Dungeon Keeper* and its ilk touch on this, but th extent of the interference makes you more player than arbitrator.

What happens when the player is expected to self-referee? In *Pac-Man*, what if the player decides if a ghost has caught Pac-Man and chooses when to end or restart play? Most would cheat, even if it means they only cheat themselves. Like it or not, we need clear, consistent rules to follow or bend and independent authorities to maintain them.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY

The swansong

It's six years since I began writing a little book called Trigger Happy. Back then my usual explanation of the project, when I was chatting to people at parties, was that it was about 'the aesthetics of videogames'. It was an impressively efficient conversation killer. Blank stares and silence while the interlocutor carried out a rapid internal monologue: "Okay, now how am I going to get away from this geek?" Almost worse was politely feigned interest – a long-drawn-out "Oh!", and then, hesitantly, "You mean, how they look?" Well, not exactly. Not only. Can I have some more beer?

This phrase about aesthetics, once received as a pure oxymoron – a baffling juxtaposition of high philosophy and low entertainment – now seems to be more generally palatable. People know about *Grand Theft Auto* et al – if they haven't played them they've seen someone play them, or they've read scurrilous newspaper reports about them. And they accept more readily the idea that there's something interesting going on. Meanwhile, both within academia and without, there are more and more good writers who don't feel embarrassed to be writing about this form of art.

It's a slow process. When my book was reviewed in the Times Literary Supplement, a mysteriously fatigued woman complained that it was 'far too long', and, in a borderline libel, accused me and my editor of deliberately spinning the subject out to fill the covers. As if a whole new genre of creative endeavour did not merit even 250 pages accorded to it! Her response is typical of a kind of prejudice that still exists in certain quarters today.

I was fortunate to receive a somewhat more positive review from Tony Parsons, music writer turned professional dad and sentimental novelist, who performed a nice rhetorical trick. After saying that Trigger Happy was 'almost certainly the best book that could be written about videogames', he proceeded to explain that this was because videogames were essentially worthless. In his day, you see, youth culture was punk – rebellious, cool, creative. A culture of gaming, on the other hand, just means that we are placid slaves of corporate dream factories. It's a clever argument, designed to appeal to ageing reactionaries everywhere, but it won't hold up. We are no more force-fed the mechanised results of others' imagination in games than we are in cinema. And, just as in cinema, among the wealth of works produced there is always a mix of cynical blockbusters and original, stunning works of beauty.

> "Among the wealth of works produced there is always a mix of cynical blockbusters and original, stunning works of beauty"

I've been gratified to see that many of the arguments I made in the original book have been brilliantly answered by the best games to have appeared since. (I am not egotistically claiming to have altered the course of gaming history, just that certain gifted designers had independently noticed the same things I had.) I argued that games should create coherent, beautiful spaces to engender an emotion of wonder, and then along came *Ico*. I suggested that games might draw on the non-realist traditions in art history, and then there was *Rez*. I insisted that a feeling of dramatic involvement would arise from improvements in AI rather than in prescripted cut-scenes, and we got *Halo*. I hoped that games would widen their scope with new control systems: enter EyeToy. These jewels of recent gaming history do not quite make the book's arguments obsolete, since there are still mountains of dull and incoherent gaming fodder. The stylistic shift between *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* and its sequel I find depressing, an acknowledgment that marketing a clichéd aesthetic to teenage boys is still seen as the best way to assure profit. And for every *MGS3*, pushing the boundaries with ideas of complex corporeal peril, there is a *Doom 3*, a glorified tech demo whose symbolic paucity and spatial failure would have been risible ten years ago.

Meanwhile, games still have a long way to go in treating the political arena with any consistent maturity. What does it mean to put terrorists and law-enforcement agents in a game after 2001? Episode five, season four of 24 plays out like a cross between *Metal Gear Solid* and *Time Crisis*; conversely, I look forward to the first game that explicitly takes place in the world of swirling propaganda and arcane geopolitical strategy of our current 'War on Terror'.

This column, dear readers, has a retrospective feel because it's the last one. I am hanging up my thumbsticks and working on a new book about political language. I would like to say that it has been a privilege to write for **Edge**, and to engage in many conversations with its consistently intelligent and passionate readership. It has also been most stimulating to rub up against my fellow columnists. I thank Messrs Mott and Diniz-Sanches for indulging me, and I look forward to continuing to observe the world of games as a consumer. As long as we have a Kojima or a Mizuguchi around, I think it will be a very interesting ride. Stay trigger-happy, won't you?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com



Illustration: tstokes



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Love spreads

Guy meets girl. We all know that storyline. Guy meets guy, or girl meets girl – the 20th century made us comfortable with that. But this is the 21st century, so how about this: guy who likes girls becomes girl; other guy, who also likes girls, also becomes girl; guy who likes girls but has become a girl meets other guy who also likes girls but has also become a girl – and they fall in love.

Try making a Blur song out of that.

I met **Torley Torgeson** last month, while I was looking into the stories of disabled people using virtual worlds to live freer lives online. Torgeson has Asperger's syndrome, and Torgeson is a nut. Even **Catherine Smith**, the senior marketing manager at Linden Labs, is happy to say so. "We love him," she told me, "but he's a nut." But Smith is slightly misguided. Torgeson isn't a 'he' any more.

He used to be. He used to wear a neon-pink monk's robe, with bright green gloves, to match his pink-and-green speedboat. But now he wears a black dress, and he has breasts. He has become a she. Sometime in November last year, Torgeson told me, his male character "collided with a spacetime rift and was never heard from again."

Meanwhile, somewhere across the virtual continent of *Second Life* – where all this is unfolding – **Jade Lily** was born. Lily's owner is a man, but he chose to join *Second Life* as a woman, just to see what it felt like. Lily's creator originally joined *Second Life* to have an online relationship with an ex-girlfriend, who now lived far away. The girlfriend joined as a man, and they tried a few virtual dates. "I thought it would be interesting to have a relationship with a guy in *Second Life* who was actually a girl in real life," Lily explained. "It didn't work out." But Lily kept playing as a woman, and soon Lily and Torgeson met. "Jade's the type of person who I felt I 'knew' early on," Torgeson said. The two hit it off, and are now an inseparable virtual couple. "I am in love with Jade," Torgeson claims. "Simply put, I am happy when I am with her." It's a 21st-century love-affair: a lesbian relationship between two men who insist they are absolutely not gay.

"I'm not attracted to guys physically," Lily insists. "In real life, I'm clearly attracted to women. In *Second Life*, it gets shady. I see my avatar, Jade, and I'm compelled to play a female role... because it's what she's supposed to do, I guess. *Second Life* has either taught me a lot about myself, or created more questions. Maybe both."

> It's a 21st century love-affair: a lesbian relationship between two men who insist they are absolutely not gay

Virtual worlds are a way of making more concrete a relationship that would otherwise be fragile and distant. In the past, a relationship with a far-away partner meant occasional awkward chats on the phone; now these connections can flower in fully animated splendour. Many residents see in virtual worlds the seeds of a new kind of utopia: a world that recaptures pre-AIDS innocence, and where gender politics and sexual morality no longer apply. (After all, there are no laws against online bigamy.) In virtual worlds, where we are liberated from the restrictions of our bodies, sexuality is often the first area people experiment with. In the early days of *EverQuest* designers were stunned to discover that players were holding marriage ceremonies, swapping rings and sharing bank accounts (there are now 5,000 married couples in the game). Nowadays, in more experimental virtual worlds like *Second Life*, sex is big business. A major source of online income for some players is dancing at a *Second Life* strip club, getting tips from passers-by. There are even online escorts, which you can hire for 500 Linden Dollars – around £1 – for half an hour of interactive cybersex (performed with the aid of special furniture, which animates your character in compromising positions, and even special 'skins' which replicate male and female genitalia). Linden Labs insists that *Second Life* is only accessible by over-18s, so who are they to dictate what their residents want to do? After all, 'virtual' doesn't have to mean 'virtuous'.

In fact, the two words do share the same root. But, through 'virtues' – or qualities – 'virtual' has come to mean 'in essence'; something imaginary that nonetheless has an effect on the real. True to form, virtual relationships have begun to encroach on the real world. At least one US custody case has used online game transcripts as evidence of infidelity.

Even Torgeson and Lily, overwhelmed by their feelings for each other, hope to meet in person. Their love is so pure, they think, that perhaps their lack of homosexual feelings won't matter. "Do I want to meet Jade in real life?" Torgeson wrote. "ABSOLUTELY, YES! She's such an exceptional person. Simple as that. There are certain things that can be faked online, but real personality shines through. And she shines so brightly."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



Illustration: tstokes



BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Call Social Services

Most clichés have a grain of truth to them ('there are plenty more fish in the sea', 'never trust your shoes to a funfair worker', etc), and there's certainly something to the hoary old adage 'radio has the best pictures'. But in an era where technology takes the effort out of everything, it seems we no longer even have to do our own imagining.

Though I never owned a BBC Model B, almost all my poncey, middle-class mates did. I'd seek refuge at their palatial mansions, too traumatised to return to the whorehouse in which I'd been raised. There I would lose myself in Superior Software's *Citadel*.

I recently revisited *Citadel*, and I couldn't tell what it was that had originally stuck in my affections. It's an ugly and unremarkable action adventure, but as a child of indeterminate age I was awed by the richness of the world. My memory was of an utterly convincing microcosm of reality squeezed into a brown-and-cream slab of '80s consumer plastic. Yet re-experiencing that microcosm as an adult I realised it was about as convincing a recreation of reality as a photograph of a kitten stapled to a bonsai tree, with a potato stuck on a shaft of bamboo meant to represent the sun. Somehow, Superior Software sold to my youthful self a believable world without elaborate cut-scenes or a single carefully rendered blade of grass.

When I originally played *Citadel* I didn't see a pink castle made of jagged blocks. I saw a majestic fortress towering above a sea of snarling peaks, its corridors ripe with the stench of trolls. My avatar was no pixellated dwarf, but as real as you or I, weathered by decades of adventuring. I was transported more by subconscious fantasy than the artist's whim. Imagination filled in the blanks. Nowadays, games do all the work for us. Graphics are so ruddy swell that there's little room for user interpretation. *Half-Life 2* is such a convincing, benchmark recreation of a realistic environment that there's little left for our brains to do.

The graphics in *Half-Life 2*, or *Splinter Cell*, or *Call Of Duty* are an easier target for criticism than you'd think. They strive for realism, but do a Paula Radcliffe before the finishing line. We notice what's not there because so much of what should be there is. Yet the graphics in *Citadel*, or *Donkey Kong*, or *Jet Set Willy* are so far removed from real life (short of an acid-fuelled stay in a stately home) that they virtually transcend criticism. They're functional, yes, but work as a kind of visual shorthand.

> Nowadays, games do all the work for us. Graphics are so ruddy swell that there's little room for user interpretation

It was only when Star Wars arrived that people started to criticise the wobbly sets in Doctor Who. Prior to that the audience's imaginations could forgive any number of aliens fashioned from offal-stuffed condoms.

At the risk of wafting across like some musty old fart, a large part of what concerns me is that the youth of today (you can practically hear the rattle of my Zimmer frame...) would rather play videogames ahead of traditional games like cops and plumbers, shove-a-turnip or lupus. They are games which not only require a degree of imagination on the part of the child, but social interaction.

I'm not for a minute advocating we ditch the last 20 years of graphical evolution. I'm just concerned that if all kids do is play modern games we'll end up breeding a generation of Paul W Andersons (the W stands for 'What A Lot Of Wubbish Films He's Made'), whose entire creative vocabulary appears to stem from a lifetime playing *Mortal Kombat*. Would tarnished wunderkind George Lucas have redefined cinema if he'd spent all his formative years achieving high scores on *Pong* (though current form suggests he spent the last two decades wanking into a pile of money)?

My kids got a lot of games for Christmas last year, and for the first few weeks of 2005 play games was pretty much all they did. It seemed unfair to limit their playing as we normally do – but it was soon apparent that the games marathon started to affect them. Their social skills went to pot and all they talked about was games. And so they were banned from all games for a fortnight. Non-negotiable.

After three days they stopped talking about games altogether. They rediscovered all the other toys they'd got for Christmas and had promptly forgotten about when they unwrapped the Nintendo DS I'd stupidly bought myself (them). The Lego set got built. Robosapien was dragged out. They built cities out of books and boxes, and boats out of duvets and bunk beds. They even – god forbid – played Monopoly. In fact, they enjoyed themselves so much that they had to be reminded when the ban was over.

Though they're back on the games, their playing time is now a fraction of what it was. The astonishing thing is they don't even seem to mind. After all, even sandbox-style games like *The Sims 2* can't offer the infinite flexibility of making Green Greedo have dirty bum sex with your sister's Barbie, while Man-At-Arms and Orko use an eyeliner to draw spurting phalluses all over her Dream Kitchen walls.

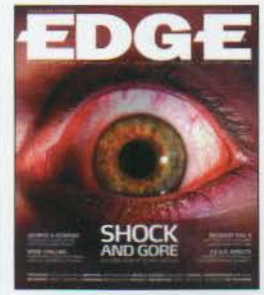
Um... please don't tell Social Services.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mostly for television



illustration tstokes

Inbox



Issue 147

Microsoft's handling of the Xbox's faulty power cord issue was going so smoothly, but they fell badly at the last hurdle. The replacement cord I received has a European-style two-pin plug. Assuming this wasn't simply a mistake, Microsoft must have done this purely to cut costs. There is not even a mention in the accompanying booklet that UK users would need to buy, at their own expense, a two-pin to three-pin plug adapter. Microsoft wouldn't dare sell a new Xbox with a Euro-style plug, so why is it OK to fob off existing customers with one?

I actually feel *more* concerned about the fire risk from using the replacement cord with an adapter than using my existing potentially lethal cord! Isn't it obvious that when it comes to safety issues, being seen to openly cut corners will undermine consumer trust and goodwill?

I feel like they're saying UK Xbox owners don't really matter, and therefore *I* don't matter. This, along with my increased safety fears, has made me decide to hit them where it hurts: the GameCube is now my console of choice.
Rob Collins

I feel I really must take issue with some of your more derisive comments on the issue of how fear is interpreted in videogames (Scare Tactics, **E**147). One recurring point in particular in the article seems to imply that when we are concerned (or indeed, 'scared') for our on-screen character's well-being that we are not sensing Fear (with a capital 'F') itself but rather merely anxious of the gameplay consequences. You then compare this less favourably to how fear is incorporated into other media like literature and film.

But just because we're scared that our memory cards might be getting erased in Eternal Darkness doesn't mean that we're scared more for our own game progress rather than our in-game character's health. After all, if our game is erased then our character's well-being has been affected as well as our own – the concerns are almost one and the same. How can you be so sure that we're more concerned about our game progress when Alex Roivas is getting smacked around by monsters onscreen, accompanied by the 'No controller inserted' message box? I feel sure that my instinctive leaps towards my GameCube to check the controller connections were first and foremost to save her hide from a good kicking. Our interactivity in games compels us to preserve our storyline. If a new horror film could manage to intentionally shut our DVD players down at a crucial point mid-plot, would we be concerned about not seeing the rest of the film, or the state of our hardware? Probably both – and that's just how it goes for games, too.

Also, just because we are worried about whether our little mannequin can afford the next bazooka or not does not mean that we have lost sight of our ultimate goals either – 'the moment you become more concerned about finding a save point than finding your sister, all that atmospheric effort becomes irrelevant'. Literature and film storylines have short-term objectives too and frequently we as audiences are more concerned with whether Anakin Skywalker will win the pod race rather than whether he can help Amidala et al stave off their incoming aggressors.

I feel sure that my instinctive leaps towards my GameCube to check the controller connections were first and foremost to save her hide from a kicking

So stop being so negative about the state of fear in games, please. Sure, there is a lot of scope for improvement as you point out, but I've been a damn sight closer to my wits' end playing Resident Evil 4 for the last few weeks than I have sitting though any of the horror films or books on offer in the last 12 months. And I'm convinced it wasn't for the thought of not being able to afford the mine thrower because I had to buy that first-aid spray after that double El Gigante attack.
James Rhodes

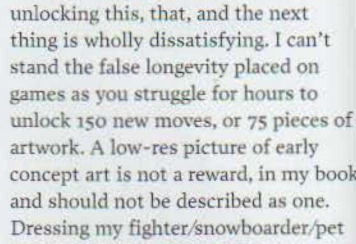
There's no question games now have a more sophisticated vocabulary of fear, and no question moments in *Eternal Darkness* have elements of fright, frustration and real, pure fear interwoven. But there's no getting away from the fact that poor gameplay can disastrously undercut atmosphere. Right?

E146's Time Extend article attributed *Prince Of Persia: TSOT* critical acclaim largely on the basis that it was designed unlike other videogames, and in doing so the article brought to light a subject that has deeply bothered me for some time.

"Then you will have seen everything we have to give you, everything you have paid for." I for one believe that the standard videogame structure of unlocking this, that, and the next thing is wholly dissatisfying. I can't stand the false longevity placed on games as you struggle for hours to unlock 150 new moves, or 75 pieces of artwork. A low-res picture of early concept art is not a reward, in my book and should not be described as one. Dressing my fighter/snowboarder/pet monkey in thousands of different outfits, including a rainbow afro, does not give me pleasure. I want playability as my reward. I want another level of pure adrenaline as my reward.

Def Jam: Fight For NY suggested that you needed to boost your charisma by changing your outfits, and adding bling. I did not buy the game to play Barbie, I bought it to kick seven shades of crap out of Ludacris.

Such materialism did not seem out of place in *DOA:XBV* because it complemented the way you played the game. It was not forced longevity, but a



Our *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* Time Extend struck a chord with Andrew Merson, who'd rather beat up rappers than dress up Barbie. Ah, the agony of choice...

fundamental gameplay function. Maybe if more games had the style of *POP*, instead of a *Pokémon* attitude to collectables, we'd all be happier.
Andrew Merson

Does it really have to be one or the other? It's clear that if games want to evolve they have to become better at adapting to player preferences, be they Barbie lovers or Ludacris bulliers.



Dan Scales praises Nintendo's DS for its ability to attract non-gamers into the fold

I made an incredible discovery the other day. While pondering over the next title to add to my dwindling collection of Nintendo stock, it occurred to me that I am the victim of a terrible effect.

I thought: 'I love games. I love reading about them, talking about them, and would love to get involved in the industry. But when do I actually play them?'

But before that, some backstory: I obtained a SNES as a hand-me-down from my brother at the age of ten and found the console incredibly 'nutritious', and have remained an avid fan of the company ever since. Although I skipped the N64 days, having Sony's entry into the market instead, I am now the proud owner of a GameCube and Game Boy Advance SP, and am hoping to obtain the intriguing DS upon release. I will happily admit I am a 'hardcore' gamer. I love the escapism, and the entire principle. Games are fun. But I am a 'hardcore' gamer on a casual level. I thought: 'I love games. I love reading about them, talking about them, and would love to get involved in the industry. But when do I actually play them?'

Some of my friends are in a similar position, although to a lesser extent. I have become the creation of a battered industry. I see very little to get excited about these days, or even in the foreseeable future (exceptions being anything *Final Fantasy* and a certain *Legend Of Zelda* distraction incoming). And what does it say when somebody – who holds opinions about the current situation and direction – loses the will to play?
Simon Crimp

However low enthusiasm for gaming slips, it only ever takes one game for it to be rekindled. It just has to be the right game, and that's where **Edge**'s previews come in handy. This month alone the prospect of the inescapable *World of WarCraft*, the irrepressible *Lego Star Wars* or the unexpected *Mario Kart Arcade GP* should be enough to kick off the cravings.

Having just read **E147** cover to cover, one particular article stuck in my mind. It was the interview with Nintendo's Jim Merrick, regarding the strategy of the DS, and its comparisons to the PSP. I'd just like to congratulate you on one of the most refreshing interviews I've read in some time.

It's nice to see that you're not shy to insist that PRs are not just able to run through the motions of the products they represent, regurgitating information that we all already know but in the sugar-coated way they're oh so good at. I almost laughed out loud when the issue of the PSPs technical specs were 'reinforced' into the interview, and could visualise the stuttering and hesitation in the replies (I can only they weren't scripted purely for ease of reading.)

Being a proud PSP owner perhaps this made my grin slightly wider than others, but it still made for a nice change. Keep up the good work – it's nice to know that even though your design seems to have been dumbed down overall (in my opinion), your content continues to flourish.
Dan Clarke

Well, there's nothing more guaranteed to bring out our inner Paxman than a badly thought-out analogy.

It's OK to like average games, isn't it? I've been playing videogames since the late 1970s and have seen my fair share of so-called average titles over the years. These are the sort of games that don't offer anything new, have many flaws and are generally put in the category of 'don't bother'. Due to finances and time constraints, I've tended to focus my gaming time on AAA titles and I've rarely been disappointed in those games.

But I did something different last month. I bought an 'average' game – *Galleon*. I'd been following *Galleon*'s development over the years, yet when it was released to a rather lukewarm reception I decided to leave it on the shelf. However, when it appeared in the sales I decided to snap it up and take a chance. And you know what? I've been enjoying it. Immensely. I can see the flaws, but am able to look past them and enjoy the game for what it's worth.

But do I tell anybody else? No. For some strange reason, I keep my thoughts to myself. After all, it's not the done thing to like a supposedly average game, is it? Imagine the derisory comments I'd get. Best to keep quiet. But why? I shouldn't be embarrassed. It's OK to like average games, isn't it?
Peter Wilstone

But surely *Galleon* is the very antithesis of an 'average' game? Wildly inventive and sorely flawed, it balances out to something that's well beyond the run of the mill.

Just wanted to share my experience with you as a brand-new import DS owner.

I bought the DS because with a wife and a three-year-old daughter I no longer have command of the TV but still wanted to do some gaming. I have only had the DS for a day but already have noticed something interesting about it. Last night I took it to my in-laws to show off, and found that my father-in-law, who has never been interested in games, got hooked on the minigames in *Mario 64 DS*, as has my wife. In fact to date she has played it far more than I have!

The simplicity of the touchscreen interface seems to be very appealing to non-gamers, and I believe this could be the key to the success of the machine. I have no doubt that if you let someone who is not necessarily a gamer play either *Ridge Racers* on PSP or *Wario Ware Touched!* I know which game they would instantly prefer to play. I'm not saying that I'm not turned on by flashy graphics; I am. I will probably get a PSP as soon as they come out in the US, too. Everyone keeps going on about videogames not being able to break into mainstream consciousness like music or films; it's just possible that Nintendo's unique approach to handheld gaming could bring it that one step closer...

I'm off to try and beat my wife's level 13 on the Mario/Shyguy minigame.
Dan Scales

Early sales suggest that the DS is delivering on Satoru Iwata's promise of a bringing new players to gaming. *Nintendogs* will only add to the flow.

I'm writing to you with a concern over your reviews section: you never mention music and/or audio. Why not?

Take the last issue (**E147**), for example: there were 19 A4 sides devoted to reviewing games. How

Continued

much was written about the music/ sound design/ambience? I counted 30 measly words; 29 of those were for *Darwinia* and the remaining word was 'sounds' in the *Resident Evil 4* review – I suppose indicating that it actually had some. I presume the rest of the games reviewed did not?

Alas, it seems that long gone are the days when a Rob Hubbard soundtrack could sell a C64 game on its own – but they were good days. Now? Developers seem to want games to be like films. Really? Well, no problem! Take a look at the rave reviews that the American Beauty or Lord Of The Rings soundtracks received. Don't think that there are the same things in computer games? Listen to the excellent job that the sound team on Lionhead's *Fable* did. What a difference that soundtrack makes! **Edge**'s review did give 22 words to the soundtrack in its review in issue 142 (out of three A4 sides), but you didn't say why it was excellent, or give any comment on how it complimented the gameplay...

What really gets my back up is not so much that you choose to ignore so much of that which aids atmosphere, or the feelings that you get from a great game soundtrack – this is your right as reviewers. No, it's that you then have the gall to turn around and make Best Audio Design one out of only eight major awards in issue 145! I was under the impression from your reviews that you don't really listen to the audio?! Please explain.

Music and audio play such an important part in the gaming experience. I would love time to return to the heady days of the soundtrack being as much a selling point as, say, the visuals, but I'm not that naïve. Suffice to say, I think **Edge** could do a lot better in laying off the technicalities of how you change multiple silencers on whatever guns in whatever new FPS and think more about the experience that the end-gamer is going to get – a part of which is sound.
Hugh Edwards

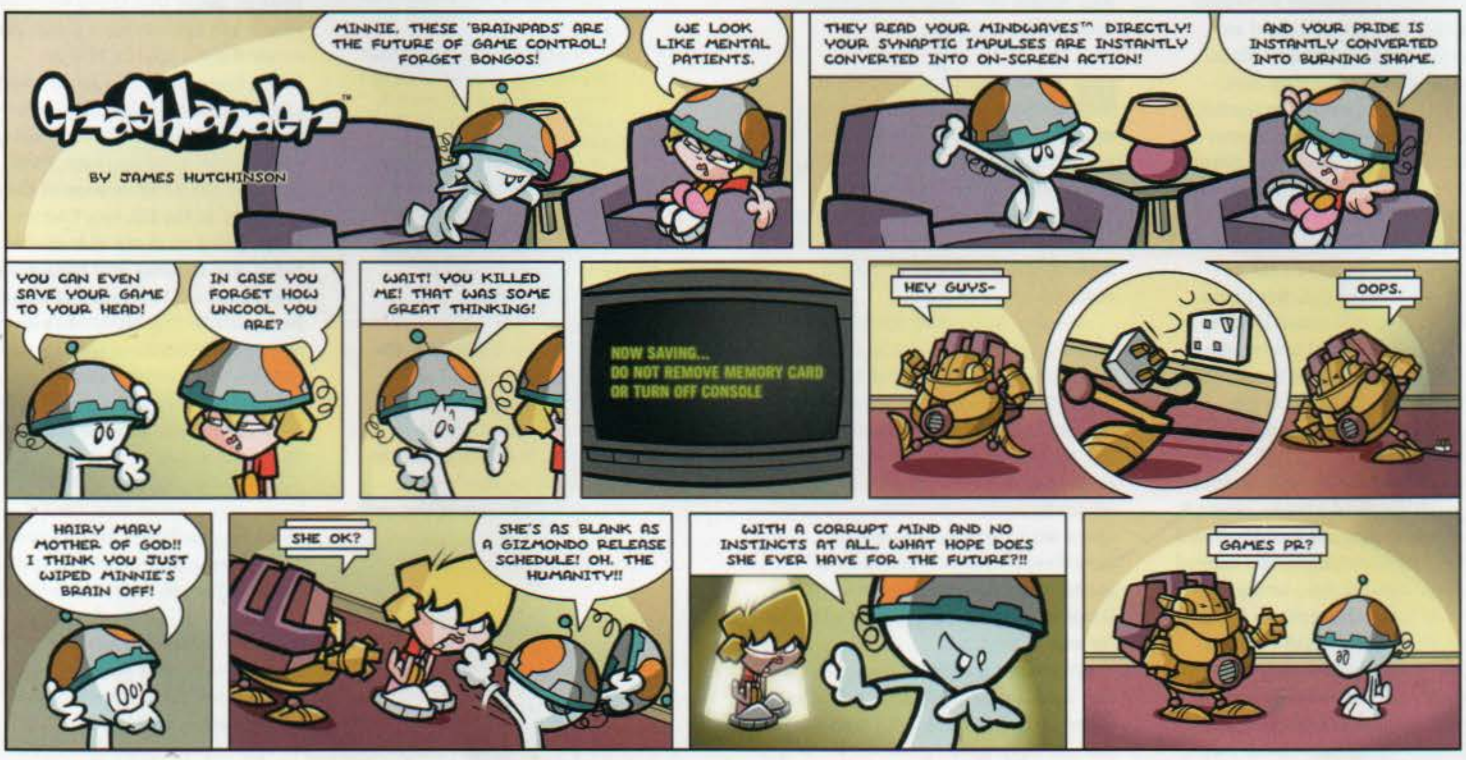
Audio design is something we consider very carefully in our reviews, which is why you'll see it given prominence when it deserves it, such as the work to be found in *Darwinia*. Soundtracks are a different matter – music is notoriously subjective and we'll stick to reviewing games, not track-listings. Incidentally, since when has **Edge** been A4 sized? Honestly, if only people put a little research into their letters...

To me, Xbox Live used to be a harsh gaming environment full of verbal abuse and players exploiting glitches in games. I was ready to give up on Live until I stumbled upon the TGSN clan. What started as a clan has grown into a community of more then 150 members composed of gamers who want to play games for fun and not receive the torrent of abuse that has become part of the Xbox Live experience for regular Live gamers.

Games are actually moderated by a set of basic rules, with no abuse and no cheating. Players who break these rules are removed from the clan. So you are left with a group of likeminded gamers who all now enjoy their live games on a regular basis.

These guys deserve some credit for the work that they have done in turning Live into what it should be.
David Knight

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW

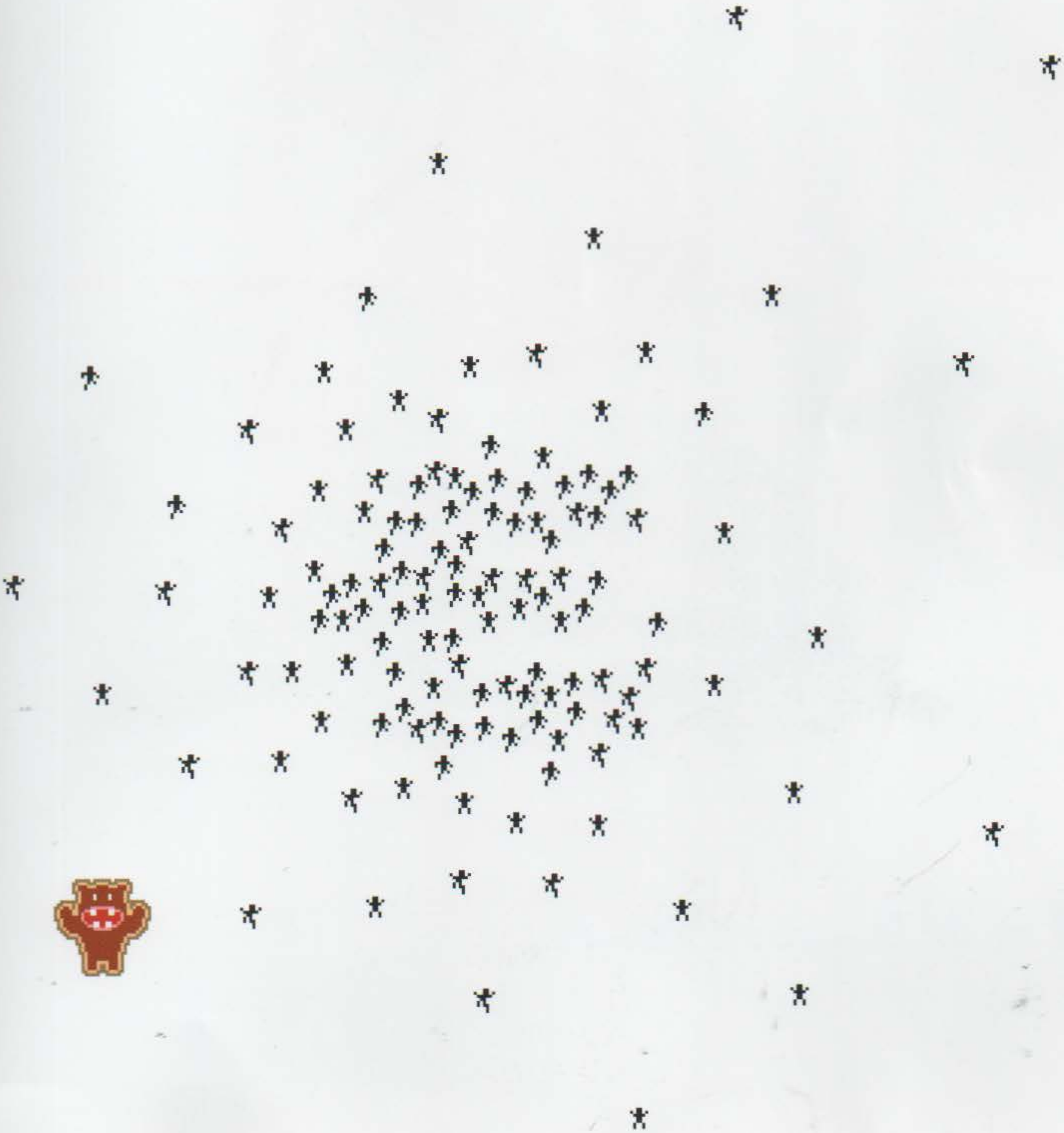


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